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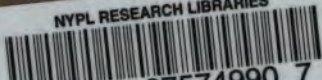
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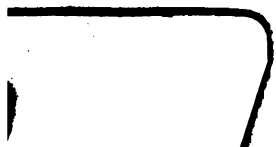


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*Can This
be Love?*

❁ *Mrs. Parr* ❁

183



CAN THIS BE LOVE?

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No



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CAN THIS BE LOVE?

BY

Louisa (Taylor)

MRS. PARR

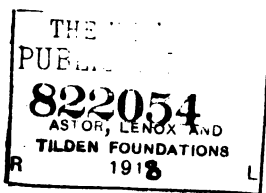
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CAN THIS BE LOVE?



CHAPTER I.

It was the 15th of February, at the close of a wet, stormy day, that a family was seated in the sitting-room of a house in one of those quiet Groves which lead from the Fulham Road towards Chelsea. It was a clean-curtained, bright, cheerful-looking house with a green door and a brass knocker, over which was a small plate engraved with the name of Clarkson.

Mrs. Clarkson was busy putting the finishing stitches in a garment which her motherly ingenuity had contrived out of a cast-off article belonging to her husband, and when she laid down her needle and held up her handiwork, there was good reason for the justifiable pride with which she regarded it, for really, as she often said, when James left off wearing anything, most persons would say it was past turning to any account, "but there they are," she soliloquized with a satisfied nod of her head, "and a very good job I've made of them."

"Here, Stella," she called to a little girl seated on

a low stool near her, "take these and lay them on that chair — carefully, now — I want your father to see how nice they look." Then, glancing at the clock, she added, "Why, it's gone six; he'll be here in another few minutes. Now then, Lottie, put away your books; stir up the fire, child, and you and Carry tidy up the room, there's good girls."

The two girls thus addressed jumped up with cheerful alacrity to do their mother's bidding. They were good-tempered, handy little maidens of twelve and thirteen, able to battle and romp with their young brother, a sturdy tyrant of ten, and to look after and take care of little Stella, who from being fragile, pale, and fair, was looked on as the delicate one of the family.

James Clarkson, cashier to a large mercantile firm in the city, had somewhat of a struggle to provide for the numerous wants of his household. His income was barely over £200 a year, but then, as he used to say to his friends, Charlotte was such a wonderful manager. How she contrived to do as she did was more than he could tell, and come upon her when you would, you always found her smiling and cheerful. This panegyric was due to Mrs. Clarkson's loving, kindly nature; she seemed to embody all those qualities which go to form the word mother, and the centre of her happiness and pleasure was in her home and her family. Many a sorrow and anxiety had she and her husband borne together, but they had carried

their burdens bravely, chasing away present care by the hope that better days were in store for them, although how those better days were to come was a dim uncertainty. That Mr. Clarkson's income or position should improve was all but impossible, and the only relative they had, although a rich man, had adopted a nephew of his own whom he had made heir to his property.

Notwithstanding the scantiness of her materials, Mrs. Clarkson often indulged in castle-building. Just now her dreams were rather of a prosaic order, induced by watching her two girls lifting the chairs and pushing into place the heavy, old-fashioned furniture. Strong and healthy as they both were, a few years ought to see them out in the world earning something, so that the parents might manage to do rather more for Edgar, their only boy, and that delicate-looking little Stella.

"I can't think who gave you your pale face," she said as, looking at the child, she spoke out of her reflections; "I wish I could pinch some roses into your cheeks."

"I can, mother, you let me try;" and Edgar pounced upon his little sister, to be promptly fallen upon in his turn by Lottie, who forcibly impressed on him the fact that Stella was a girl, "and girls aren't strong like boys, sir."

"Oh, aren't they," said Edgar derisively, finding

that his efforts to get free were vain. "I wish you wouldn't interfere. Mother — now is Lottie to —"

But further appeal and Mrs. Clarkson's answer were here interrupted by the sound of a key in the door, and a minute later, greeted by a general welcome of "Father, oh!" James Clarkson stood on the threshold of the room. He gave a general nod of his head, took off his hat and overcoat, hung them up, deposited his dripping umbrella in the stand, and with something between a sigh and a grunt took his accustomed seat by the fire, and put on his slippers, which it was Stella's care to see were "warm and comfy."

"Well, my dear, and how's the world going on? What's the news, eh?"

Mrs. Clarkson always began by asking this question, to which her husband as invariably answered, "Oh, I don't know — things just about the same as usual — nothing stirring but stagnation." After which he leisurely and by degrees related to her every occurrence of the day, knowing that the most trivial thing which happened to him would be of importance to her. The worries and perplexities of business, the inconsistencies of the masters, the shortcomings of the clerks, were all poured out to her to be severally smoothed down and have their sharp corners rounded off. Mrs. Clarkson had the womanly charm of softening the injury, while she gave sympathy to the injured, and, the confidences

ended, her husband felt at peace with all the world. On this particular evening, however, instead of giving his usual answer he remained silent for a moment, and then in a voice which seemed troubled by emotion, he said —

“Why — poor Briggs is dead.”

“La! James, you don’t say so. Why how — What did he die of? Was it sudden?”

“So it seems. He was down at Brighton, stopping, and felt out of sorts somehow, and somebody advised him to have a hot bath — one of the Turkish ones, I dare say. Anyhow, coming out of it he was seized with a fit, and never rightly came to himself again.”

“How awful! dear me! Well, though he wasn’t, poor man, much of a friend to you or to me, James, still you can’t hear of one you’ve known all your lifetime being cut off in a moment without feeling that it upsets you. I can see it has you, my dear.”

“I wish we’d been more reconciled, I must say.”

“So far as that goes it certainly wasn’t your fault that you weren’t; but the last time that we met him — at Clapham Station, don’t you remember — and you went up and held out your hand to him; well, he spoke as short and stiff as if he thought the next thing you’d do would be to ask him for the loan of five pounds. No, my dear, you must be just there;” and she glanced at her husband, evidently surprised that her argument did not seem as

conclusive to him as usual. "One thing is," she continued, "I dare say his nephew won't be so close with the money. 'It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good,' and I'm sure that young fellow must have led the life of a toad under a harrow. Years ago, the few times your sister ever asked us there, I declare it made my flesh creep to hear the two nag-nag at the boy; he couldn't do, or speak, or look so as to please either of them. It was 'Put that down, take care of your clothes, mind the furniture,' until I thought if he'd been a child of mine, I'd rather he'd be left a beggar than have his spirits broken and his temper spoilt in that way."

"They called him Briggs, didn't they?" asked Mr. Clarkson abstractedly. "What was his proper name — do you remember, Char?"

"Well, not at this moment I don't. It seems to have slipped my memory," she added after a few moments' reflection, "but he was Briggs' sister's son."

Mr. Clarkson nodded his head in assent.

"I know — she married against their wishes somebody they didn't approve of, and there was a split that wasn't ever made up until Briggs took the notion in his head that he'd adopt the boy."

"And a bitter pill that was to your sister. I read between the lines when she wrote saying she'd be Stella's godmother. Poor soul, she's dead and

gone, but if it had been the Queen herself, she couldn't have made the offer more condescendingly."

Nine years had passed since that day, but Mrs. Clarkson had never been able to forget the mortification of being obliged to accept that honour.

"Come, Char, now isn't that going a little far? It's true I wished at the time that she hadn't hit on quite such a romantic-sounding name as Stella, but that's all that struck me. Seeing that I was her only brother, 'twasn't so unnatural her wishing to be godmother to one of the children."

"Certainly it wasn't! 'Twas the thing you might have most looked for, only the idea never struck her until that boy was singled out as heir. No, no, my dear; she couldn't bear the thought, if they were both gone, of one of Briggs' family having the chance of handling the money."

"Hm! do you think, then, she would ha' been better pleased if he'd singled out one of our children?"

"Not a bit. My belief is that riches had hardened the poor souls until the power of caring a button for any living creature but themselves had gone from them entirely. I know your poor sister used to display all her finery, thinking I was eaten up with envy and jealousy, instead of which, I was filled with feelings of pity to think there was nobody to care for her, and that she cared for nobody—but there! we mustn't forget that she'd have been a

different woman most likely if it had pleased God to bless her with a family."

"I dare say she would," said Mr. Clarkson absently. "The working of Providence is certainly a great mystery."

Mrs. Clarkson looked at her husband with anxiety. It was evident to her that this sudden death of his brother-in-law had given a shock to him. "He's got such a feeling heart, dear fellow," she was saying inwardly, "that it worries him to think they weren't more friendly; and anything like sudden death always seems to prey upon James's spirits. Your tea will do you good, my dear," she said aloud, laying her hand on his shoulder. "Come down and have it, it's all ready. This has been a trying day for you, I can see. Come, chicks, come down; let's all look after dear father."

The whole family went down into the under sitting-room, in which it was their habit to take their meals. Tea—the only meal when they were all assembled—was usually a very merry gathering, the children relating in turn to their father what had occurred to them during the day; but though this evening he listened and smiled as usual, his wife saw that his thoughts were often far away; and when they had finished she was not surprised to hear him say—

"My dears, I want to have a little quiet talk with mother. Stop down here for a time, will you!"

CHAPTER II.

"WHAT is it, James?" asked Mrs. Clarkson softly, as, the door closed, the husband and wife seated themselves one on each side of the fire.

"Why, my dear, a very extraordinary thing has happened. The lawyer has been to see me about our little Stella."

"Oh my! James! You don't say that he's remembered to leave the dear child something? Well, that is the last thing I should ever have thought of."

James nodded his head to show that her surmise was true.

"I never! Did he say how much?"

"Everything."

Mrs. Clarkson's face went red and white by turns. She tried to speak, but only a gasp came, and her husband continued —

"Nobody else has a penny."

"Arthur," exclaimed Mrs. Clarkson — "his nephew?"

"Not even the mention of his name. It seems that he and the young fellow, who'd just come back from college, had a violent quarrel about some young lady whom he flatly refused to marry, and this so

enraged the old man that he put himself into one of his awful passions, sent for the lawyer, and then and there altered his will."

"Wicked old sinner! What a shame, after all that poor lad has had to put up with. But he sha'n't suffer at our hands; we'll do what's right by him. I should feel like a thief if he hadn't his fair share. And to think after doing such a wrong to be suddenly called into eternity. Oh, James, the thought is awful."

"It appears by what the lawyer tells me—he's a Mr. Lovegrove, and seems a most right-minded, conscientious sort of gentleman—that the new will was made more as a show off than with any thought of reality. Briggs fancied that would be the best means of bringing the nephew to his senses, little thinking how soon the whole would be called into play. Mr. Lovegrove says he shall never forget his look when the will was brought back. He called his nephew in and read the whole of it over from first word to last. He was all of a tremble, and his voice shook so, that he could hardly speak, as he asked whether he meant to obey him or no. The young fellow too was white to his very lips, but he answered quite firmly that he was willing to give his uncle all submission except where by it he should forfeit his own self-respect, which, if he married the person he proposed to him, he should certainly do; and upon that the clerk was called in, he and Mr. Lovegrove were requested to

witness the signature, and then Briggs told the manservant to pack his portmanteau, as he was going off to Brighton; and he desired his nephew to clear out of the house before he came back, and never to show his face to him again."

"*That* gives you the character of the man," exclaimed Mrs. Clarkson excitedly; "to turn from his doors the poor lad whom he had pretended to care for as a son. Such hard-heartedness is abominable, James."

"Still, my dear, we mustn't forget that Mr. Lovegrove does him the justice to say that he firmly believes he never meant that will to be anything but a threat — a kind of rod to hold over the boy."

"But if so, James, it can't surely be right that we should take the money. It would be little better than a robbery, it seems to me."

"Robbery or not, my dear, what's law has to be acted upon; and if a man in his right mind and sober senses makes his will, and that will is properly signed and attested to, all the sentiment and good feeling in the world can't alter what is said in it. As he leaves his money and his land, so it must be."

Mr. Clarkson delivered this fiat in such a tone of decision that his wife felt a stop was put to further argument. For several minutes she sat silent, reflecting on the possible change in their circumstances. Already in thought they had removed to a house with a garden, Lottie and Carry were having

lessons, Edgar had gone to a good school, Stella had grown fat and rosy by a long stay in the country. Suddenly catching sight of her husband looking at her, she said, with a smile at his anxious expression —

“Only to fancy our ever having anything to call our own!”

The idea of a divided interest between her and any one of her children was an impossibility to Mrs. Clarkson. A fortune left to one was a fortune left to all. You could not separate Stella from her parents and her family.

“You haven’t quite heard all,” said Mr. Clarkson, heaving a deep-drawn sigh. “The money, as I told you, is left to Stella.”

“That I understood, my dear.”

“Yes, but it’s under a condition” — he felt his heart begin to beat so quickly that he could hardly steady his voice — “and that’s the hard part of it, Char. If the child has the money, we must in a way give her up to trustees appointed to have her properly educated for the position she is to enjoy. She may come, whenever they think proper, to see us, and I fancy they can go so far as letting us have her in her holidays; but she isn’t to actually what you call live with us until after she is one-and-twenty.”

“Then let them keep the money,” exclaimed Mrs. Clarkson promptly. “I won’t have my child taken

from me for fifty fortunes. Unnatural old brute! He could never give you a rose without sticking a thorn into your finger. Not a bit of it, James. Give the money back to the nephew 'twas intended for. We'll keep our child."

"I wish it could go back to him" — and Mr. Clarkson sighed drearily — "or at least that a good part could; but that's just the point that enrages me. There's a clause that if we refuse, or don't carry out his wishes to the letter, or try by law to upset the laid-down conditions, the whole of the fortune goes to a charity, and neither Stella nor his nephew, nor any living soul belonging to him or bearing his name, is to be permitted to touch a single halfpenny."

"And you call that man a Christian," said Mrs. Clarkson angrily. "Wanting to rob us of our child and give her up to strangers, and be most likely taught to look down upon her own father and mother. Never!" And this thought, coupled with the sudden revulsion of feeling at a disappointment so bitter, made Mrs. Clarkson burst into a flood of tears, which for a few minutes fell from her eyes quick and fast, while her husband sat looking into the fire with a troubled gaze.

After what seemed a lengthened pause, she dried her eyes and tried to be more calm; but her voice was broken and unsteady as she said appealingly —

"But, James, don't you see as I do, my dear?"

He gave a perplexed shake of his head as with a sigh he answered —

“I don’t quite know what to say. I don’t know what I ought to do for the best. I’m, as it were, torn in two ways at once. If the child was hearty and strong as the others are, I shouldn’t hesitate one bit ; but that she isn’t. She’s not made for the rough side of life ; and, Char ” —and he leaned over and took his wife’s hand in his own — “you and I ain’t so young as we used to be. It would lie heavy with me to leave her alone, or to think my dear old woman had to work for her. The others will soon be getting for themselves, and a boy can always fight his way ; but of late I’ve begun to feel very anxious about Stella.”

Mrs. Clarkson’s tears had dropped slowly and singly on her husband’s hand, but at the bare mention of separation, of being left alone, the flood-gates of grief burst open again ; and kneeling down, she leaned her head against that faithful loving heart and sobbed bitterly.

“No, no, James ; let it have its way. I shall be all the better after, and able to talk more sensibly. But you know what a fond, foolish mother I am, specially over the one who is still our baby.”

Mr. Clarkson gave that best comfort to his wife in the language of a love felt most deeply by the tried and trusted ; and then at the right moment he began to skilfully drop on the fresh-made wound the salve of consolation.

"You see, my dear, if the will was worded otherwise — for our child to remain with us — it would be our duty to send her away to school, and that would mean separation. And then it doesn't follow because poor Briggs himself hadn't any feeling for her parents, that those who'll have the trust of her will be equally hard-hearted."

"Are they named? Did you hear who they'd be?" was asked tearfully.

"Yes, the two trustees are the nephew and son of Briggs' first master, gentlemen living on their own property in the country. And the lady he wishes to be guardian and have the care of her is their sister, Mrs. Vivian Stapleton, a widow lady, with an only son."

"Oh, then, she's a mother." For the first time Mrs. Clarkson raised her head.

"That's it; just what I was thinking. Knowing what our feelings must be, is it likely she'd try to keep the child away from her parents?"

"And she'd soon get to love the darling. She'd creep her way into anybody's heart, wouldn't she?"

"She's your own child there, Charlotte."

"No, no; I've always said, of all the children, 'twas Stella took most after father."

"And then I haven't told you the best of it," said Mr. Clarkson, in a tone which tried to be most cheerful. "After she is nineteen she is not bound in any way. From the instant she comes of age, everything

is in her own hands, to do as she likes, and live with whom she pleases; and that's why Mr. Lovegrove feels so sure the will was never made to stand, for in the other one the old man had tried to keep his finger in everything."

"Well—but the poor young fellow. Can't he be benefited in any way?"

"I'm afraid not—for some years he can't; but our child must be different to what we know of ourselves. Char, if, when she has the power, she doesn't make it right with him; and that's another argument in favour of accepting."

Mrs. Clarkson nodded her head in approval. Her husband saw that, however great the sacrifice might be, she intended to submit to whatever might be best for her child's future.

"It's certainly a large sum to forfeit," she began. "We've always been told he was worth £50,000."

"Every halfpenny of that and more. That's what makes it such a serious consideration, and the necessity of her being so trained that she may be able to spend such a fortune properly."

"Of course it does. I see that now—only—"

"My dear Char, don't you think I feel the sacrifice we're making? but, please God, we shall be rewarded by seeing her grow up a good useful woman, turning the money into a blessing to many."

Mrs. Clarkson raised her tear-stained face, and looked at her husband.

"Amen," she said, solemnly. "Then it is settled that she goes, and I must take comfort in the remembrance that for nine years she was wholly ours. Ah, James, no one in the world can rob us of the happiness of having had Stella as a little child."

CHAPTER III.

BEFORE following the fate of little Stella Clarkson, upon whom Fortune seemed to have suddenly smiled, it may be as well to give some account of the young man upon whom the fickle dame had as suddenly frowned.

For many years it had been the habit of all Mr. Briggs' friends to speak of his nephew, Arthur Rodney Maynard, as a very lucky young man, one of those fortunate fellows who had but to open his mouth, and in it was popped a silver spoon in the shape of this rich childless uncle, who — simply for the reason that he could think of no one else to fix on — announced it his intention to adopt the boy as his son, and ultimately make him his heir.

Now with that utter disregard for what is for their ultimate welfare, not infrequently displayed by youth, instead of being overwhelmed with gratitude at the honour shown to him, Arthur Maynard rebelled as far as was in his power. He wished to be left with his own father and mother. He did not want to be any one else's son. More especially he did not want to belong to Uncle Briggs, whom he did not like, and to Aunt Briggs, whom he could not bear. Why

should he be sent from home, parted from all his brothers and sisters? He was very happy. He was sure his parents did not want to get rid of him. Poor people! that most assuredly they did not. Their first-born, their bright intelligent boy, was dear to them as the apple of their eye, but their means were so small, and their family growing so big that, toil and contrive as they did, to make both ends meet was becoming gradually but surely impossible. For years they had had the hope that Mr. Briggs, Mrs. Maynard's brother, would come forward with an offer to help towards giving Arthur a better education; and when this offer actually came in the shape of a proposal to adopt him, they put aside all their own sorrow and rejoiced over the good fortune that had come to their son. He would have a large house to live in, a pony to ride, good clothes wear, the best of food given him, and be sent to a school where he would be taught everything, and be brought up as a gentleman. What could any boy desire more? In vain did poor Arthur protest that he wanted none of these things. The fiat had gone forth and he was forced to obey, and at twelve years old he took leave of family, home, even his own name, and as Arthur Briggs went to live in that atmosphere of constant fault-finding and petty nagging which has worked the ruin of many a fine nature.

At the very threshold of his new home, Arthur

was met by an enemy in the person of Mrs. Briggs, whose hitherto comprehensive dislike of all the members of her husband's family was suddenly concentrated on this one small individual, thrust into the unenviable prominence of being presumptive heir to the very considerable fortune which she considered she had helped Mr. Briggs to make. It was true, as she often declared, that she believed no bigger fool than her brother James ever drew the breath of life, and if you asked her to name the woman who of all others was hateful to her, it was Charlotte his wife. Still for all that she had to be told the reason why Briggs' family was to be set up to lord it over her any more than those she belonged to; and, as Mrs. Clarkson rightly guessed, it was the rankling of this grievance which led her to offer herself to be godmother to the new baby, to whom she gave a christening robe, a row of coral beads, and the name of the heroine in the last novel she had read — Stella. This done, she considered herself in a position to argue every point with Mr. Briggs — Arthur was his nephew, Stella her niece — the boy might be his godson, the baby was her goddaughter. Why not then, if fairness was to be looked for, divide the money between them? "Never." Mr. Briggs roared out the word like a clap of thunder. Never would he consent to halve his money. "All or none." If the boy turned out well, and did everything that was wanted of him, and behaved himself properly, and obeyed his

wishes in all things, he would come into all the money he had to leave him; if, on the contrary, he turned out a failure, he wouldn't have a penny.

"Then, Josiah, I think it would be wise in you to fix on who next the money's to go to."

Mrs. Briggs said this in a voice of prophecy, as if she had already a revelation of the present heir's ruin. "Perhaps you might then remember that the wife — who's been a good and faithful wife to you — has relations of her own, and that those relations have a family."

"The best thing I can remember," said Mr. Briggs angrily, "is to leave what I've got to found a charity — some asylum for men to go to, where they can find a little peace and quiet when they happen to be saddled with fools of wives who harass and worry them."

This churlish speech had the effect of reducing Mrs. Briggs to tears. An attack of her nerves speedily followed, which invariably ended in subjugating her husband and bringing him to submission.

"Come, come, Jemima," he said. "Now don't let's have any more of this. I own I was put out, and spoke too sharply. The truth is, that you've so set your face against that boy that it angers me."

"Than which nothing could be further from my thoughts, Josiah; but after all these years to find that your sister Sarah's —" and here a series of chokes and gurgles made the unhappy man say with all haste —

"Now, never you mind about my sister Sarah. What's done is done, but if it's any comfort to you, shouldn't things turn out well, I won't forget — what's her name? — your goddaughter. Come, will that satisfy you? Will you let the thing drop now?"

Of course Mrs. Briggs said "Yes," but with that living reminder of her injury always near her, to forget it was impossible, and she carried on the continual friction so persistently that Mr. Briggs was about to propose a compromise when that fell archer, who is no respecter of persons, and who aims his arrows where we least expect them, struck at Mrs. Briggs. The unhappy woman was seized with a mortal illness, and after lingering for three months, she died.

His wife gone, Mr. Briggs found the house so dull that he determined to move about a little, go to Folkestone, Buxton, Harrogate, Scarboro' — see, as he termed it, a little of the world. He took an opinion as to the best means for giving Arthur a good education, and acting on the advice, the boy was sent first to a preparatory school, and then to Rugby. His time there over, he went on to Oxford, and from Oxford he had just returned when this serious difference with his uncle took place, which led to the alteration of the will and the forfeiture of the fortune.

Arthur was at this time twenty. He had grown from an intelligent boy into a very clever man, with a reserve of talents which no one, and least of all he himself, suspected. His was a mind which must be

stored in its own way and after its own bent. During the years he had been at school and college, although he had not carried off any of the great prizes or honours, he had sufficiently distinguished himself to be regarded by his masters and tutors as a young man of no mean promise.

But the absence of these substantial proofs of his learning was made into a grievance by Mr. Briggs, who never wearied of repeating that—through not being so lucky as some people were, and not having an uncle who paid for everything for him, *he* never got but one year's schooling—though one of the youngest chaps there, he took good care that nobody got ahead of him, and whatever prize there was to bring back, that he brought. It was all very fine for masters to write that the lad had talents of a very extraordinary order—to his mind that was tall talk and palaver—the proof of the pudding was in the eating, and the value of a thing was shown by how much you got for it.

Unfortunately Arthur had a sensitive nature. Oppressed by a weight—very far removed from gratitude—of the obligations he was under to his uncle, dissatisfaction with his position increased every year. He was constantly trying to impress upon himself how much he owed to this rich relation, whose money had given him the education to make full use of the power which was beginning to take shape in him. Swell the debt as much as he tried to, the only

result was an increased thirst for freedom. Many of us know by experience how keen are the sorrows of youth—the knife then seems to turn in the wound—we declare that the smart is greater than we can bear. It is only age and experience that teach us to silently, smilingly carry griefs. Each term when the young fellow returned home the misery of his position increased, the narrow, sordid, vulgar side of his uncle's character became more apparent to him. The people he met at the house seemed more unbearable. He entreated to be allowed to take a profession. Mr. Briggs put himself into a passion at the very idea. Wasn't he content with the prospect he'd got before him? And as for the present, was there a wish or a want that wasn't supplied for him?

"I'll tell you what," he said, "your work's cut out for you in being thankful for the luck that's fallen to your share. There's the sons of noblemen and baronets who'd jump at being my heir. You should just see how some of the ladies of title have made up to me, thinking I might be a marrying man; but they'd got the wrong sow by the ear there. It's you must get married, not me."

This was the first word dropped on a subject which later on was to sever the bond between them, and free Arthur from the fetters which were growing too galling for him to bear.

Mr. Briggs had not a far-off neighbour in a Mr. Collins, a man even more vulgar and uneducated

than himself, who was the possessor of a very large fortune and an only daughter. It occurred to Mr. Collins, and the idea was far from displeasing to Mr. Briggs, that by the union of this young lady with Mr. Briggs' nephew a combination of the two fortunes would make "a very pretty bit of property."

The elders talked the matter over, Mr. Collins volunteering to act so liberally that Mr. Briggs gave his cordial consent and promise to speak to Arthur.

Obtuse as he was, he had sufficient discernment to perceive the gulf which divided the loud, purse-proud, plain Selina Collins from Arthur — good-looking, self-possessed, gentlemanly. He therefore saw the wisdom of broaching the subject with caution, and commenced by dropping hints on marriage generally. Later on he confessed to the desire he had that he might live to see Arthur married, adding, with a seeming burst of confidence, that he was led to feel sometimes that he was not altogether so young as he used to be.

Arthur looked at him in amazement. To hear his uncle admit that mortality had any claim upon him was a novelty. "What on earth is he driving at?" he thought.

He was not doomed to any long suspense. Mr. Briggs was too accustomed to have everything his own way to be fond of what he termed "shilly shally." In the manner Arthur most abominated, a mixture of cunning and jocoseness, he informed his nephew of

the further good luck that had befallen him in having caught the fancy of Miss Selina Collins, who would have at the very least from three to four thousand a year.

Poor Arthur! it seemed to him that this proposal was the last stone degradation could aim at him. His whole being rose up in revolt. The wrongs of years insisted on asserting themselves, and he gave vent to such bitter truths that when Mr. Briggs wrote the letter which immediately brought the lawyer to him, there was much which his pride forbade him to mention to Mr. Lovegrove that accounted for the state of ungovernable rage in which this old friend found him.

What followed the reader knows. Arthur Briggs stepped across the threshold of that "well-appointed mansion," shaking from him the dust of the ten past years, and with it went his assumed name. As Arthur Rodney Maynard he would begin that fresh start which now meant life—for nothing lives that is not free. Being all but penniless, he must work. The thought was delightful to him. He had no longer any parental home. His mother was long dead, his father had married again. Something told him that with his altered prospects he should not find a welcome there. It was to his college tutor he turned, and not in vain, for within a week an offer was made him to make a tour round the world with a famous scholar whose health had suddenly

broken down; and just as little Stella was being clasped in the farewell embraces of her family, Rodney Maynard—he had dropped the Arthur—was taking his last look, for some years, of the shores of Old England.

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. VIVIAN STAPLETON — to whose guardianship the will of Mr. Briggs entrusted Stella Clarkson — was a lady of good position, a widow, with an only son. She was the daughter of the man who had given Mr. Briggs his first start in life, who had laid the foundation of his fortune, and to whom — to his credit — up to his last hour Mr. Briggs had been deeply grateful. Seen with any of this family, the boastful, self-satisfied man was a different being. He could never forget the humble position which he had originally held with them ; but, by a curious twist in his character, instead of this servile condition displeasing him, it seemed but to exalt in his mind their position.

Mrs. Stapleton — amiable, gracious, very sympathetic — always welcomed Mr. Briggs, because he brought back to her the days of a youth which had been singularly happy ; and from these memories she would be led on to speak of her marriage, the early death of her husband, the solace she had found in bringing up her only child — a son — and the rather lonely condition she was now left in, because her boy was at college and no longer lived with her. Speak-

ing of this at their last meeting, she had chanced to say, "If I had but been blessed with a daughter, it would have made my life so much happier. Do you know, Briggs, that sometimes I am half tempted to adopt a little girl."

Mr. Briggs had pooh-poohed the idea. "Why, what would Mr. Vivian say?"

"I believe he would quite approve. When he leaves college he will want to make the grand tour, as other young men do — which means going round the world now ; and with him so far away I should be more lonely than ever."

Not much more than a week had passed, when these words forcibly returned to Mr. Briggs' mind. He was labouring under an excitement which broke down all the barriers he would otherwise have seen. He named the trustees and guardians in his new will, meaning to ask their consent later on ; but, thirsting for an outlet for his outraged feelings, he began at once a letter to Mrs. Stapleton, penned with an eloquence to which he had hitherto been a stranger. He reminded her of the debt which bound him to the house of Trevor ; of the devotion he had for the family ; of the almost adoration with which he had always regarded her. Then, touching on the wound that had been given to him by his nephew, he implored her to undertake the bringing up of the child to whom he now meant to leave his money. In the midst of this appeal the letter broke off abruptly.

That same day the writer was struck down by the hand of death. And when, a few days later, the unfinished letter was sent to Mrs. Stapleton, the tears she shed at reading it were the only tribute of sorrow paid to the memory of Josiah Briggs.

Recalling the last conversation she had had with him, she saw that he had desired that she would, during his lifetime, undertake the supervision of this little girl — whom she mentally conjured up as a low-bred, perhaps vulgar child ; but the trust he had put in her his death rendered sacred. It was the last wish he had given expression to — he who had always been so faithful, so devoted, so true a friend to her and her family. To refuse this last request was impossible ; she only waited for the parents to make their decision, and then she wrote to Mrs. Clarkson, telling her that she accepted the responsibility. The letter was the effort of a delicate mind ; and the writer assured Mrs. Clarkson that she might rely on her little daughter receiving at her hands every care it was in her power to give her. "Until I have seen her," she went on to say, "I am not able to arrange my plans." And then came the question of how soon the child could come, first to see, and then to remain with her.

This question Mrs. Clarkson settled by naming an early date on which she would take Stella to Mrs. Stapleton's house, and deliver her up to her care. "I've got to give her up, James," she said, in answer

to a remonstrance from her husband that there was no need for such hurry, "so the sooner it's over the better. And having to bustle and stitch to get her things ready gives me less time to think; besides, I so want to see the lady. I do hope I shall like her."

"You're pretty sure to do that, Char, for she's bound to like you. She'd be a queer sort if she didn't, and I've no doubt about her taking to Stella. I'll bet there's a surprise in store for her in seeing that child. Judging from Briggs and Jemima, she's very likely to think something after their style is going to be brought to her."

In her heart Mrs. Clarkson had a similar suspicion, and the motherly pride in her child's refined look and behaviour helped to support her for the trying ordeal.

Mrs. Stapleton's town residence—a charmingly artistic house in Kensington Gore—was fitted up with all the luxury that money can supply, and arranged with a taste which gave the stamp of the owner's individuality. When the harmony of all this elegance drew forth praise from the beholder, Mrs. Stapleton was wont to show herself delighted. "Because," she would say, "all the merit belongs to my son. He has the most fastidious taste of any one I ever met. Already he is a perfect *æsthete*, and promises to become a *virtuoso*—a *dilettante* of the highest order. A little slip or fault that another would not perceive would be to him an agony."

Although Mrs. Stapleton would say this in the voice of a pride which filled her, she was in the habit of paying very dearly for the sensitiveness of this superfine son. Each detail and circumstance of her every-day life had to be referred to his wonderful refinement and delicacy, and much of her time was taken up in arranging that these senses were in no way offended.

Sitting in her boudoir, on this very morning, awaiting the arrival of Mrs. Clarkson and the little girl, Mrs. Stapleton's mind was occupied by doubts about her son. Should the child turn out to be plain, stupid, vulgar—well, there was an end to the matter. All she could do would be to find a good school, place her there, and trust to time and teachers to make something better of her. Yet, while making this decision, conscience was twitting her, telling her that, having accepted the trust, that was a poor way of fulfilling her duty; and then her heart—a very kindly one—smote her for the little she proposed doing to carry out the wishes of her old friend. To justify to herself this seeming treachery, she began to argue that a child born of uneducated parents, in poor surroundings, must of necessity be steeped in small vulgarities that every moment would offend both eye and ear. Could she—putting Vivian aside—be supposed to put up with these until her personal influence had altered her *protégée*. Again, was alteration—meaning improvement—probable?

Certainly. If brought into contact with her family — No. Absolute separation from them was imperative; but, then, was it possible for that to be managed? Some of these people were so intractable — so ignorant where the good of their children was concerned. Poor, perplexed Mrs. Stapleton! — she began to wish that she had never uttered one word of that desire to adopt a child, which had led to Mr. Briggs taking the notion of saddling her with this responsibility. It all sprang out of the great loneliness she felt since her boy had left her. Already she realised that when he had finished his college life she must not expect him to settle down with his too-adoring mother. Unfortunately there would be no necessity for him to work or to follow any profession. Independent of his mother's ample means, a fortune had been accumulating for him since he was a baby. He did not know what it was to have a want unsupplied or a wish ungratified.

Suddenly Mrs. Stapleton's ear was caught by the sound of the house-door bell. She gave a glance at the clock — already half-past twelve; the visitors she was expecting must have arrived.

"Mrs. Clarkson, madam," announced the butler, flinging wide open the door with an air of being accustomed to introduce none but distinguished personages. Mrs. Stapleton rose quickly, and with outstretched hand advanced to meet her visitor; but suddenly catching sight of little Stella — dressed to

look more than ordinarily attractive by her anxious mother — she made an instant's pause, exclaiming in a voice of glad surprise,

"And is this my little charge? Are you Stella? Oh, I am sure we shall love each other. Come and give me a kiss, darling."

That evening, when Mrs. Clarkson was giving her husband each detail of the visit, she said, "Oh, James, those words, and the way she said them, spoke volumes to me. I saw that the child pleased her, and that the door of her heart had flown open to let her in. Indeed, she afterwards said as much; and they were my comfort all the day."

Mrs. Clarkson did not say — even to her husband — what a trying day that had been to her. She felt it was necessary for him to have been with her if he was to understand her feelings. Her emotions had been stirred through her senses. The luxury and elegance displayed in the furnishing of the rooms; the costly knick-knacks; the wealth of flowers, with their all-pervading perfume; the delicacy of the daintily-served food of which she had partaken — each had combined to impress the immeasurable distance which spread out between her and the graceful ease of the well-bred woman whom her child was to be taught to look upon as a mother. Never before had Charlotte Clarkson felt any hot rebellion against the sordid surroundings in which her life was fixed. If the mere sight of this house, and one day passed

there, could make what was familiar and dear distasteful to her, how would it fare with Stella? Mixed with the pain of parting with her child, there crept into her heart a bitterness because of the certainty that gradually they would grow apart from one another; that the differences of manners and dress, and a thousand small trivialities, would push them so far asunder that, in time, even love could not bridge the space over. But, after the fashion some of us have of concealing the sharpest smart in the wound that pains us, Mrs. Clarkson said nothing of this to her husband or her family. She gave Mrs. Stapleton all the praise she felt was due to her, and repeated that it would have been impossible to be more kind in words and behaviour.

It had been decided that an interval of a few weeks had better pass before the child had another sight of her mother. At the end of a few days a telegram came saying that Stella was well; this was in due time followed by a letter telling Mrs. Clarkson that the two were getting on admirably. "My son," it said, "without whose approbation I am never happy, has formed golden opinions about your little daughter. He advises that I shall engage a governess for her, and take her into the country with me; and as this advice agrees entirely with my own wishes, I shall decide to act upon it. Already I find the dear child an interest and a solace to me. It has been a puzzle to find a name by which she shall call me. Mrs.

Stapleton was too formal; guardian suggests a choleric old man. My son very happily hit on Marraine — godmother — and already she says it quite prettily. We shall be starting for my country house about the 6th; will it be convenient if I bring Stella to see you on Saturday? I name Saturday, because you spoke of her father being at home in the afternoon. I am going to a concert. I would leave her on my way there, and call at 5.30 to take her home."

"It's giving a very little time for her to stay," said Mr. Clarkson, at the conclusion of the letter. "Why couldn't we have taken her back ourselves?"

"Why?" said his wife bitterly. "Why, because, James, she doesn't any longer belong to you and me, and the sooner we realise that the better."

Mr. Clarkson shook his head to show that he differed from that opinion entirely. But when Saturday came, and Stella arrived looking like a fairy in her new dainty finery, a little of the dread which filled his wife began to creep into the mind of James Clarkson; and when, later on, at the door stood the well-appointed carriage in which was seated Mrs. Stapleton, handsome, charmingly dressed, and graciously condescending, poor Clarkson felt a little humiliated that things had not gone better with him. He was conscious that the house was small; the children playing in the street noisy; that the neighbours hanging out of their windows showed vulgar curiosity. Even the little Irish servant, who idolised Stella,

came in for her share of his dissatisfaction. Why must she put her grimy face and rough red head up the area steps under the very eyes of the footman? This demon of discontent interfered with the good-bye he wanted to give to his child. Lottie! Carry! Edgar!—did ever any of them before behave so stupidly, standing staring, never saying a word? Even Char wasn't on the spot as she was accustomed to be, but stood like a statue. Everything was passing as if in a dream. He had kissed the child, seen her turn from the door and be helped into the carriage, without seeming to realise what was happening. Now the coachman was gathering up the reins; Mrs. Stapleton was making a farewell movement to them all; Stella turned to him a little face all stained with tears. "Oh!" he ran down the steps, but already they had started. He could see Mrs. Stapleton drawing the child nearer to her, trying to soothe her grief; another few moments, and they had turned the corner and were gone—gone! Re-entering the house, he went up to his wife, and putting his arm around her, "Ah, Char," he said, "I can enter into all you feel now. I believe there our hearts are one. If 'twas to come all over again we'd keep our child, and Briggs' money might go to Jericho."

CHAPTER V.

IT is not our intention in this history to give a detailed account of the different incidents which occurred during the uneventful school-days of Stella Clarkson. Year by year, as she grew, she entwined herself more closely round the hopes and the affections of Mrs. Stapleton, who was wont to say that had it not been for this fresh interest given to her life, her time must have passed very wearily. Her son, arrived at man's estate, had become a well-known figure in London society; where, according to his mother's belief, he was looked on as a genius, and revered as chief disciple of a new school of taste and art, which was distinguished by the peculiarity, that its followers only worshipped the things which their more common-place fellow-creatures found ugly or incomprehensible.

In reality, Vivian Stapleton was not far removed from being in some ways a clever man, but his talents were weighted in the beginning of life by being heir to a large fortune, and by a superabundant amount of maternal devotion, and later on all but obscured under a carefully-masked vanity, and an overwhelming wish to make a figure in the world.

The wonderful book he was about to write, the charming pictures already commenced, had for years formed the topic of Mrs. Stapleton's conversation. As of yore, she was never weary of singing the praises of her wonderful son, and she had so thoroughly educated Stella in the same belief, that the bare idea of measuring this gifted being by the standard applied to ordinary mortals would have been looked on by them both as nothing short of heresy.

In all matters, uninfluenced by her son, Mrs. Stapleton was able to exercise discernment and discretion, but his slightest wish was to her a law, to be carried out and obeyed without hesitation. Thus, so long as Stella remained a pretty child, who could be romped with and made a toy and plaything of, the word school was never whispered. A nice clever girl was engaged to be her governess, and the report given was that she was progressing splendidly. Vivian's return either to the London home or to "The Hawthorns," their house in the country, was hailed as a holiday, and the only lessons then done by Stella were the erratic teachings she received in painting, poetry, or the art of recitation. Never was there a more apt pupil seen than this quick, graceful child, whose whole energies were taxed to satisfy her master, and Vivian felt his trouble amply rewarded by the praise and applause he received as her teacher.

Suddenly a cloud spread over this blue heaven of approbation. Vivian spent a winter in Italy. In the

spring Mrs. Stapleton joined him at Florence. When she returned to England he went to Switzerland with some climbing men, and through a variety of circumstances it happened that an interval of more than eighteen months went by without his seeing Stella. Certainly, when they met again, she had greatly changed. It seemed as if she had taken a sudden plunge into that awkward age at which most girls arrive gradually. She had sprung up in height with the quickness of a weed, her hitherto pretty arms and legs reminded one of matches or well-picked bones. Her face had grown long—its oval was completely gone—her complexion was muddy, her hair so thick that it had to be arranged in a fashion which seemed to deform her head; and beyond this, she had developed an awkward self-conscious manner which filled her with constant embarrassment.

Their first greeting over, Vivian sat gazing at her with looks which filled his mother with despair. For months she had been dreading this meeting, entreating the poor girl—she was just turned thirteen—to do this thing and not to do the other thing, and all on Vivian's account, until the unhappy Stella hardly ventured to breathe, and bolted like an arrow the moment she caught a sign of dismissal.

Then burst forth the floodgates of Vivian's speech. "What has happened? What have you done to her?" he kept repeating. "Heavenly powers! what a monster! My dear mother, you cannot keep her

about you, or if so you must give me up. The sight of that awkward piece of humanity near me would crush every idea, stifle every emotion. Oh!" and with the lengthened groan he gave the exaggerated shudder which his mother knew so well, and which was meant to convey that the whole gamut of his sensitive nerves was jarred on and put out of harmony.

"But, Vivian, my dear, remember Stella is just at that awkward age of transition which all young people have to go through — boys and girls too."

"Do you mean me to understand that I —"

Mrs. Stapleton hastened to correct the error into which she had fallen.

"You!" she said, in a tone of reproach. "Vivian, has it ever fallen to your lot to be like others? To suffer from the imperfections and drawbacks to which the greater portion of poor humanity are heirs? I was speaking of the ordinary run of children, and among them this suddenly-developed awkwardness of Stella is not singular."

"All the same," he said with a shrug of his shoulders, "to a temperament such as mine that inartistic presence is unbearable. It would be a constant offence to my eye, added to which I should be everlastingly reminded of the disappointment this alteration is to me. I had written a charming little thing which I meant to teach her to recite; and again, there is my 'Ideala.' Where now am I to find a

model? The picture is ruined. I may as well put the whole thing into the fire."

"Oh, Vivian, dear, pray don't be rash. Only give her time; she'll come all right again, indeed she will. Why, if I could only recall their names, I could tell you of a dozen girls—celebrated beauties of the present day—who were positively repulsive at Stella's age."

"That, dear mother, would in no way counteract the depressing effect she has on me. Of course I know—I don't ask—I can't expect that you should understand this unfortunately sensitive temperament of mine, but," and this with a well-practised air of the confession being dragged from him—"we all have to pay a penalty for gifts we possess."

"My dearest boy, who should know that better than I? All I ask is, What am I to do with her? for apart from the alteration in her looks, Stella is the same dear child she ever was—so thoughtful, so good, so loving to me."

"I dare say; although that has little bearing on the present matter."

"You mean on the question of sending her away?" said Mrs. Stapleton hesitatingly.

"I don't remember that suggestion coming from me." Vivian was beginning to assume his distant, impenetrable air which invariably subjugated his mother.

"You seemed to think it was impossible that one house should hold the two of you."

Mrs. Stapleton thought she would try and put on a little gaiety.

"I did, and I do; but there are chambers — rooms — hotels in any number which would suit me."

"And you can bear to think that where it is a question between you and *anybody*, I could for an instant contemplate the bare idea of *you* giving way. Oh, my boy, I have done nothing to deserve this of you. If there were a hundred Stellas, I would cheerfully send them to the North Pole rather than give you one moment's disquietude; but I think you should hardly require that I should need to tell you this."

In a moment Vivian was kneeling at her side, with his arms round her. In spite of his many quips and cranks, he loved his mother fondly.

"I do know it," he said earnestly. "Forgive me."

"Darling, there is nothing to forgive — nothing. The whole matter is settled, and really settled, I dare say, for Stella's good. To tell the truth, I have for some time felt that some change in education might be good for her. She has so few girl companions; indeed, since Delia Trevor went to Lausanne she has nobody."

"What about her family?" asked Vivian somewhat irrelevantly.

"What about them — how?" was Mrs. Stapleton's vague answer.

"Why, I mean, do they still ever meet or communicate with each other?"

"Yes, certainly. Stella writes to her parents frequently. If she forgets it I always remind her. Then when we are in town she always takes a present when she goes to see them. It's quite a business getting something for the father and mother, and the boy, and the sisters."

"The parents, I think I've heard you say, are nice sort of people?"

"Very — I don't think in their class they could be better; but the girls — oh, terrible!"

"Vulgar?"

"Well, perhaps — not quite that; but third-rate and common-place to a degree. I can see that Stella feels it. She is always so subdued and quiet after a visit to them."

"My horror would be, Is this change in her the leaven of vulgarity — the cloven foot of obscure birth peeping out?"

"Oh no," said Mrs. Stapleton decidedly, "of that I am quite sure; besides, I repeat, the parents have no trace of vulgarity — that is, of real vulgarity — in them. I don't say that externally you would take the mother for a lady, or the father for a gentleman, but *au fond* they really are so."

"A painful incongruity, and as regards nature a failure in art. I detest anomalies. In a vulgar body give me a vulgar mind, and I know where I am.

Just as those who possess refined feelings and delicate sentiments should be *grands seigneurs et dames* to the tips of their fingers. I would rather have blue blood in my veins than possess the wealth of a millionaire."

Mrs. Stapleton could always admire what she held to be the eloquence of her son, without considering herself sufficiently clever to closely follow his reasonings. In this case the murmur of acquiescence she gave was perhaps less enthusiastic than usual, from the fact that from a distance Mr. and Mrs. Clarkson always commanded her respect. Since the day Stella was entrusted to her care, they had never interfered or thrust themselves forward in any way. The letters the mother sent to her child were masterpieces of affection and simplicity; and although, with the thoughtlessness of youth, Stella might sometimes leave them too long unanswered, she treasured each one; for, notwithstanding the affection she gave to Mrs. Stapleton, she loved her mother very dearly. Mrs. Stapleton showed her appreciation of the Clarksons' delicate behaviour by the liberality of the presents which she suggested that Stella should send them; and when, on the occasion of a recent visit, the girl on her return had asked why, if she was to have so much money, she could not at once give some to her parents, to make them live more comfortably, Mrs. Stapleton had deplored the wording of Mr. Briggs' will, which insisted on the accumulation of

the property. "But," she added, "there are only a few years to wait now, and then you will marry, or come of age, and in either case have the uncontrolled disposition of a very large sum of money; and it will be your first duty, and I am sure also your greatest pleasure, to ensure that the remaining years of your father and mother are passed in comfort and plenty. The man who did not agree to that would not be a worthy husband for you, Stella."

"And I wouldn't marry him."

"That's right. If you did, I should look on all my training as thrown away."

"But I don't intend ever to marry. I mean to live always with you."

"And with Vivian?"

"And with Vivian too. But then he might get married, mightn't he?"

"He might, certainly."

"I don't think if he did that you or I would like that lady."

"I should try to."

"Should you? Oh, but I don't think it could be, because she would have to be so beautiful, and clever, and wise, and witty, and so faultless in every way, that I cannot think wherever any one would go to find her."

"Neither can I; but perhaps when we least expect it some fairy godmother may bring her to him. Story-books say such things have happened to these young Prince Charmings."

CHAPTER VI.

MANY years had passed before Stella Clarkson was told the reason of this sudden decision, that it was necessary for her to be sent to school. By that time she could afford to laugh at the prejudice which formerly would have filled her with distress and pain.

To soften the separation, and throw some gleam of sunshine into the banishment, Mrs. Stapleton selected for Stella the same school as that to which her niece, Delia Trevor, had gone.

The two girls were already friends, and with Delia near, Stella would not feel so lonely. It was Mrs. Stapleton herself for whom one had most need to be sorry, for her son, refusing to believe that a gawky girl could be in any way a companion for *his* mother, saw no more necessity for remaining near her than he had seen heretofore.

As for Stella, it was but natural that she should very quickly regain her good spirits, and before long she was able to write to Mrs. Stapleton and tell her that she was quite happy, and liked school-life and Middle Corvoran so much, that she had to thank "dear Mairaine a thousand times for sending her there."

At "Les Palmiers," that pretty house whose green freshness of lawn, shaded by spreading trees, attracts the attention of every one who takes the road leading to Vevey from Lausanne, Stella remained for three years—years which passed very happily. During this time she never returned to England, but, for at least one holiday, and sometimes for two in the year, Mrs. Stapleton would go to her, and would join Mdlle. Corvoran at Les Avants, Villars, Saas Fee, or any one of the mountain resorts to which the popular governess, in holiday-time, took her pupils. From each visit Mrs. Stapleton returned more satisfied with the improvement she met with in Stella, who had grown into the unaffected, frank, gay, typical English girl, with a disposition which made her beloved by all who knew her, and a face fair enough to attract admiration from all who saw her.

Mrs. Stapleton had no fear now that Stella's presence would jar on the sensitive nerves of her son. Time, which had given her young charge beauty, had kindly increased the store of Vivian's common-sense. He laughed now at the craze which had at that time possessed him; shook his head over the indulgent love which made his "weak" mother give way to his folly; and did not see that, although his ambition had taken loftier aims, he was as much the slave of Imitation as formerly, when he had followed in the footsteps of the apostle who sat all night to watch a lily die.

It had been arranged for some time past that as soon as Stella reached the age of seventeen she was to leave school, and to travel in company with Mrs. Stapleton. It was with a mixed happiness that the young girl felt the date for parting with her present life was drawing very near. Since the time she had come to "*Les Palmiers*," the walls of the school-house had made for her a world in which was enclosed all the motives and subjects for joy and sorrow. There were the friends with whose daily life her own was entwined. All she knew of disappointments, ambitions, aspirations, were centred there. It would be impossible to leave all this without regret, or to sever these ties without a pang; yet, while feeling this she was full of curiosity and longing to be out in the world, to make one of that vast crowd who daily play in the great drama of life. The unfolding of each sentiment in the young heart is so wondrous — the stirring of each tender susceptibility such a new surprise! Emotions then burst forth fresh and green like the buds in spring, and call for as delicate handling. All these sensibilities were beginning to take shape in Stella, and agitate the hitherto unruffled calmness of her nature. She and some few of her more chosen friends had now long conversations together, drifting into subjects whose gravity would have surprised older listeners unacquainted with the serious views so many young girls hold at the start of life. These young Minervas censured frivolity, the

waste of time upon too many pleasures ; they exalted self-sacrifice, heroism, living for others. They even spoke of love, and this with great authority, because not a heart among them had ever been troubled, and drew for one another's benefit the pattern of the man each believed it possible to give a heart to.

It would have greatly pleased Mrs. Stapleton to hear that Stella's model was drawn on lines bearing the strongest resemblance to Vivian, as he lived in her recollection. For some time now the devoted mother had been hugging to her breast a scheme for bringing about a union between these two dear beloved beings, which showed more plainly than any other thing could do how thoroughly Stella had won her affection.

Fully aware that the Clarkson family would be a great stumbling-block to her son, Mrs. Stapleton had argued that the longer Stella was kept abroad the better, and this, not with the wish to diminish the love between parents and child, but that by separation the line of demarcation would grow sharper, and that Stella would notice it more.

Out of her love for the girl, Mrs. Stapleton had gone several times to Matilda Grove, bearer of gifts which, though they came in Stella's name, had cost Mrs. Stapleton an infinity of trouble in choosing. After each visit she came to the conclusion that her going there was a mistake. Mrs. Clarkson, amid her common-place surroundings, was to her a common-

place woman, and she had to keep a sharp watch on her own good breeding from the fear that she might be betrayed into an air of condescension. Oh, the pity of it that they would not emigrate—all go off to America or Australia. If only the ocean rolled between them and Stella, she would feel an affection for the whole family, including those two impossible daughters, whom it took all her faith and credulity to believe were actually Stella's sisters. To be just, Lottie and Carry were no more unlike Stella now than they had been nine years before, at the opening of this story. But every point in them had developed and exaggerated. At heart they were two good, dutiful, loving girls, guileless of a mean idea. To them their sister was a being to be worshipped; it had never entered either of their minds to be jealous or envious of her. In time, when she got the power, they felt that she was "certain to be good to father and mother, so that they had not to work any more, and could take things easy and comfortable." That was the goal of their anticipation as regarded Stella. For themselves they neither expected nor wanted anything. One had gained the summit of her ambition by passing the post-office examination; the other got £50 a year for being a book-keeper.

With healthy minds in healthy bodies, full of content with themselves and love for others, they knew a heaven of happiness to which no change of position or gift of fortune could add jot or title. But Nature,

so bounteous in her good gifts to their internal qualities, had been equally liberal to their external appearance. Although not bearing any great resemblance to one another, each was buxom, bouncing, highly-coloured; buds that, for their future good looks, had burst into blossom too early. Their voices, actions, even their mode of dressing, impressed on you their vitality—it was impossible to escape them. Without desire or effort on their part you had to notice them. Benevolent, cheery folk can give a complacent smile to these buoyant creatures whose youth will not last for ever, but through many of us they send a shiver—and this was the effect they had on Mrs. Stapleton.

A woman with wider sympathies with her fellow-creatures might have spoken of this to Stella; but Mrs. Stapleton's originally large nature had been dwarfed by the conventionality of her training, which taught her to measure all she said and did by one standard—good breeding. To offend the custom and taste of the set in which she moved was more unpardonable than a sin—the latter you could forgive; the former you could not forget. In spite of this weakness—and it was by no means her only one—Mrs. Stapleton was a very loveable woman, with a keen appreciation of many of the higher qualities which she knew she did not possess.

During the years that Stella had been with her, she constantly told herself that the companionship of the

child was influencing for good her better nature ; and as the time drew near for her and her ward to be reunited, she felt as much joy in the prospect of their meeting as if Stella had been in reality her daughter. Vivian had left her some months before to pay a visit to Japan. It was now September, and she did not expect him back in Europe until the spring. Before he started, she had told him that by that time Stella would have left school, and would again be living with her — on which announcement he had made no comment, beyond the hope that she would find pleasure in the girl's society.

"You see no objection to her being with us?" Mrs. Stapleton had ventured to say.

"I, my dear mother ! What possible difference can it make to me?" Vivian was at this time posing as a being absolutely indifferent to woman's society.

"Well, dear, you know before — of course I am very grateful to you for it now — but then I should never have dreamed of sending her to school, only you —"

"Yes, yes, I dare say ; but," tapping her shoulder with his hand, "try and remember that I have not room in my busy brain to hoard up the small recollections of long ago. Some fresh interest, a new idea, sends a wave of thought which sweeps over the past, and as regards the common-place events of every-day life, leaves a blank, unsullied page."

"Dear one!" murmured his mother admiringly, "of course I ought to know. Of course I do know, only —"

He stopped her with a shake of his head. "Only," he echoed, "settle your life independently of me; and if it makes you happier to have twenty girls with you, have twenty."

"It will not keep you away from home?"

"Certainly not," he said, with a little laugh. "Only the probability is, I shall forget all about them."

"Oh, I've no intention of taxing your memory. Stella's companionship is all that is needed by me;" and with a glance from out the corner of her eye she ventured to add, "She has grown into a sweet girl; I love her as a daughter."

"Really," said her son, with an air of abstraction, conveying the idea that his thoughts were about as near to her as the centre of Africa.

Mrs. Stapleton felt it was best not to venture more, but to trust to time and opportunity to bring about a livelier interest between them. She had seen other fancies take possession of and die out in her son; perhaps this indifference to women would follow them.

CHAPTER VII.

STELLA declared — and Mrs. Stapleton agreed with her — that nothing could exceed the pleasures of that winter which they spent together after she had left school.

To the girl, full of the power of enjoyment and enthusiasm, the excitement of travelling, seeing new places, living in cities hitherto only read about and heard of, was a source of perpetual delight. There was always something to look forward to, something to do ; each day was full of adventure and the unforeseen. Mrs. Stapleton, feeling the contagion of that young ardent mind, bubbling over with high spirits and animation, refreshed at the spring of Stella's ardour those impressions which time and familiarity had staled. The weeks and months seemed to fly. Now they were at Florence, Venice, Naples, getting a peep at Sorrento, Capri ; "taking just a bird's-eye view," Mrs. Stapleton would say, adding that she hoped the next time Stella came, they would be with a companion whose every word seemed to mark out fresh beauties in all he looked upon. Stella did not require that she should name who this companion was. During the whole of their travel the devoted

mother never lost sight of what to her was the main point at issue—the hope that Stella might prove irresistibly attractive to Vivian. His name was never long left out of any conversation. Scenery, pictures, statuary, churches, all turned on the one pivot—Vivian's taste and what he thought of them. Years before, Mrs. Stapleton had visited Italy with her son, and the criticisms he had then passed, the places he had raved about, the things he could not be induced to look at, were all retailed for Stella's edification. And the girl listened attentively, quite prepared to submit to the oracle who still occupied the pinnacle upon which in her childish days she had placed him.

During her school life, surrounded by her girl companions, the masculine portion of the world's community had had but little interest for Stella. Wise Mdlle. Corvoran never tabooed the object or subject of love, which, if introduced into conversation, was freely discussed as something not only individually possible but probable—a disease which all might catch and few could avoid. This matter-of-fact treatment generally damps youthful imagination; it is mystery which kindles the fire. No parent had ever an anxious moment about one of Mdlle. Corvoran's pupils so long as they remained under the shelter of "Les Palmiers." But the aspect of Stella Clarkson's life was now altered; each day seemed to open up fresh possibilities, developing new ideas in her. One of her many

surprises was the interest and kindness shown to them by the masculine portion of their fellow-travellers, many of whom were eager to render any service which was likely to open up an acquaintance with a girl so unaffectedly charming and pretty.

"Do you know, Marraine," she said one day, as they sat chatting together, just sufficiently tired by an excursion to Chiaja to make idleness a luxury, "that I am beginning to believe that most men are very nice."

"Certainly they are, dear; but to whom," and this with a little anxiety, "do you refer?"

Already there had risen up before Mrs. Stapleton's eyes a fair young man of that day, who had told them so much about Virgil; and yesterday, at San Severino, the one with the black beard, who she found was placed opposite to them at *table d'hôte*. These visions were not dispelled until Stella said —

"Oh, not to anybody in particular. I was thinking of all those we have met everywhere."

"Well, I must say," said Mrs. Stapleton, in a tone of sincere conviction, "that we have been most fortunate. They have all been such thorough gentlemen, and that is no slight praise when you consider the standard of perfection we measure them by."

"Oh, but I never expect to find any one to put on the same level as Vivian."

Mrs. Stapleton smiled delightedly, and Stella continued —

"Do you know it is one of the things I most look forward to — meeting him again."

"So do I," said Mrs. Stapleton sympathetically.

"I wonder will he know me ; because I think I've altered — a *little* improved perhaps — since he saw me."

"A *little improved*, Miss Modesty. Why, you bundle of vanity," giving her arm a shake, "you know you have grown very pretty."

"Pretty? Am I? Do you really think so? No, no; please don't laugh at me, Marraine. It isn't vanity which makes me ask — it is — well, I may as well tell the truth — because I very much want to be so."

"You may rest satisfied then," said Mrs. Stapleton, smiling kindly at the sweet face turned to her, "that that fairy godmother, who has so well looked after you, didn't forget to squeeze in beauty among her gifts, and I believe I am as grateful to her for it as you can be. Oh, my dear child," and she put on a very grave face, "what a fright you gave me about four years ago."

"A fright! I! How?"

"Well, I don't think I ever meant to tell you — at least not for some time — but I really think I must, because all danger is over now, and I'm sure it will add to our fun ;" and upon this Mrs. Stapleton related to Stella a somewhat toned-down version of the real cause of her being so suddenly packed off to

school. "I was quite broken-hearted at the time to part with you," continued the kindly woman, "but I'm so glad I made the effort now."

"I'm sure it has been for my good."

"Certainly it has, in every way. And it was all Vivian's doing. You see, darling, there is another thing for us to be grateful to him for."

"Yes," said Stella half-heartedly. "I very well remember that time. And how puzzled I used to be. Now I have the key to it all. But suppose that I had remained ugly?"

"Darling! Impossible."

"Not at all. Many of the girls at school who weren't half as bad as I — don't you remember my dreadful legs and arms? real spindles they were — have never altered a bit. They are the same now: their faces half a yard long," and she pulled hers down in imitation; "just like mine used to be — pimples, freckles, exactly as I had."

"Dear, dear, how dreadful."

"I don't know; it hasn't made any difference to those who really care for them. Their fathers and mothers and friends love them just as well."

"And so, my dear child, I should have loved you. At the same time I am very glad to have you as you are."

"And so am I to be so; but it does me good to hear that if I had not been so you still would have loved me."

Mrs. Stapleton drew the young girl closely to her.

"Ah!" she said, "I don't believe anything could prevent me doing that now. As the old verse says, 'You've locked yourself inside my heart and thrown away the key.'"

There was another close hug, and then Stella raised her head, and smiling as she gave it a little wag, she said —

"I've got to be even though yet with Mr. Vivian. He must be made to assure me that he has overcome his prejudices, and is able to endure the sight of my presence. I'll pay him out in his own coin yet, you'll see."

Mrs. Stapleton gave her hearty consent to this probability.

"I trust," she said fervently, "that in little over a month now we shall have had our happy meeting. Directly after Easter we must leave Rome and go straight to Territet, there to wait his arrival. Nothing could have pleased me more than his consenting to join us in Switzerland. I was so afraid that once back in London, there he'd stay."

Mrs. Stapleton did not then know that, but for an accident of travel, her fears would most certainly have been justified. Vivian's last stopping-place was New York, where a happy chance brought him into rather close contact with a man he had for some time been most anxious to know — Rodney Maynard — known to the world as Maynard Rodney, one of

the most suddenly successful writers of the day. He had transposed his name when signing his first literary effort, and as that had brought him fame, he had kept the — if it may be so termed — pseudonym, by which he was now universally known in society. Ever anxious to follow in the track of any star, Vivian laid himself out to be more than usually agreeable. He was able to be of some service to his new acquaintance, and finding out the date on which he meant to return to England, he took care to secure his own passage by the same vessel. Naturally thrown together on board the ship, the intimacy increased. Previously to starting, Maynard Rodney — as we shall now call him — had happened to say in conversation that before settling down to some fresh work that he was engaged on, he meant to spend a week or so at Montreux to look up a sick friend who was staying near there. The hint was immediately seized on, and a telegram, despatched to Mrs. Stapleton, informed her that at Territet she would be joined by Vivian.

It was the 23rd of April, St. George's Day in the calendar, but in the diaries of two women underlined and marked as "probable date of Vivian's arrival."

For a week past Mrs. Stapleton and Stella had been kept in a perfect turmoil of anxiety. "Expect me on the 17th," followed by "Unavoidably detained," "Coming without fail on Thursday," "Circumstances over which I have no control prevent . . ."

But oh, joy! on the previous evening a telegram had come from Paris, sent off from the Lyons station, saying, "Meet me at the station Territet, at something after nine." Then began a grand search in the time-table, so that they might know the exact minute to expect the train. Was it possible! Yes, actually that train did not stop at Territet; passengers must get out at the Montreux station. Was ever anything so provoking? A solemn conclave was held, to which Clements — the maid — was admitted, that they might come to a decision as to what was best to do; and it was at length finally settled, Mrs. Stapleton not being wholly free from the supposition that an exception to rules might be made in favour of Vivian, that the mother should await her son at Territet, early perambulations not being a strong point in her character; while Stella, accompanied by Clements, should drive to the Montreux station.

Positively there was not the slightest reason to get up at seven o'clock. Yet Stella was moving about her room at that hour, utterly disgracing all those lofty sentiments she had agreed with at "Les Palmiers," about the undue waste of time on dress, by carefully inspecting a new tailor-made gown, and setting in a row all her hats, to be severally tried on when her hair was done.

Already there was a little pink flush in her cheeks, and her eyes were beginning to dance with the

mischievous that was brimming over in her. It was due to herself, she felt, that Vivian should have a lesson, and if she could give it, she meant it to be a sharp one; and then a softened look came into her face, and the reflection, at which she was no longer looking, was more charming than before. What a friend he had been to her, and that too from the very first, when she was only a very lonely-hearted little child. How he had tried to win her love, and had succeeded too. For years she had thought of nothing so much as striving to please him. What hours she had spent hammering those verses, whose beauties she could not then appreciate, into her poor little brains —

“Lady on whom the moon now looks,
Before thy shrine on bended knee.”

Yes, that movement of her arm and hands was the very one he had taught her, and she could repeat the whole poem still. She remembered every word, that would tell him that he had not been forgotten by her. “And because you grew plain, he drove you away,” she said, addressing the fair image before her. “Well, I don’t think that was very kind. It is not the way you would have treated him. So now for revenge.” And with deft fingers she began to arrange her hair, which was of the colour that the French call *cendré*, admirably in keeping with her delicate features and complexion. There was some

indecision about the hat, but at length one was chosen. And when, quite equipped, with all her armour on, she took a final survey of herself, she burst out laughing, saying, "Well, for good right down vanity, commend me to myself, Miss Stella Clarkson."

CHAPTER VIII.

"HE did not know me one bit, Marraine. It's true," said Stella, turning to Vivian; "Clements said, 'There he is!' just as I saw your eyes wander past me."

"That shows that you were in a similar condition, only you had Clements to point me out to you."

"I did not need Clements, I should have known you anywhere. You're very little altered;" and Stella looked at him fixedly.

"That is not what you can say of her, Vivian, is it?"

Mrs. Stapleton was in a heaven of delight. The two beings she loved best were close to her. Breakfast was over, and they had gone on to the terrace to sit. The day was perfect, not a cloud in the sky, the deep blue of which was mirrored in the waters of the lake below.

"I don't know," he said with a half smile. "I have not made a thoroughly critical examination yet."

"Oh, pray spare me that," said Stella. "I'm too old to go back to school, and I don't want to be driven like Eve out of Paradise."

"*This* being Paradise?"

"Very like it — to me."

"I really don't wonder," put in Mrs. Stapleton; "already she's had quite enough to turn her head here. Everybody admires her, they do indeed."

"You see Marraine feels it is a fact that must be forcibly impressed on you, or else you will give it no credit."

"I don't know that — seeing is believing," said Vivian. "At breakfast I noticed that the green-eyed monster was hovering between several of the Adams and our table."

"Oh, yes," laughed Mrs. Stapleton. "I can assure you that you're already the object of any amount of jealousy. For the last week we haven't made an engagement; Stella wouldn't promise to go anywhere. She was so afraid that it might just happen that then you'd come."

He made an unnecessarily profound bow.

"I ought to be highly flattered," he said.

"H'm!" said Stella, making a little grimace as she gave a nod of her head; "but you're not."

"Not! how do you know?"

"Because no one could ever flatter you."

Vivian looked at her. Mrs. Stapleton, eager to arrange everything, explained, "Yes, dear; you'll find you are on exactly the same high pedestal that you ever were with her."

"Safely out of my reach," said Stella.

"Oh, but idols have been known to stoop down, Stella ; have they not, Vivian, dear ?"

"I don't know that I've been much in their company," he said rather curtly. He was vexed with his mother's interference in the conversation. He wanted to hear what Stella herself had to say. The admiration that he saw the girl excited had whetted his curiosity. It was his nature to value most that which others most valued, added to which he needed but two eyes to see that Stella had grown into a very charming creature.

Quick to note the little alteration in his tone which had caused a shadow to fall on the face of his mother, Stella said, "By the way, though, you've been lately in the company of a very clever man — I'm dying to know all about him. We've asked for his books at the library — Marraine means to buy them."

"Oh, Rodney, you mean. Ah, he is a clever fellow ; I wish he was still with me."

"So do I. I should like to see him. I should be awfully nervous though."

"I don't see why you should, dear," Mrs. Stapleton said.

"Well, you see, then there would be two of them."

"And is it not said that there is safety in numbers ?" asked Vivian.

"Yes, but in this case I'm not so sure that that

holds good. Except that to sit by and listen while you two talked would be splendid — something I should delight in."

"Well, stranger things than that have happened."

"Really! do you mean that he's likely to come here?"

"It's possible."

A radiant smile lit up Mrs. Stapleton's face.

"Very possible I should say," and she turned an adoring look upon her son, who answered it with an expression of surprise. "Why, has he not been your companion in travel? that is enough for me, knowing as I do the power you have of attracting people to you. I call it magnetic!"

"Ah, well, in this case the power is all the other way. In New York people were just breaking their necks to get at Rodney; there were men who would have given the eyes out of their heads for my chance of going home in the same steamer with him. He is thought to be a difficult fellow to get on with. All I can say is, *I* did not find him so."

"I should form a very poor opinion of his cleverness if you had," said the adoring mother. "What do you say, Stella?"

"Well, of course I can't believe that there is anybody quite as clever as Vivian, and if there is, I'm certain he can't be more clever — no, on that point imagination fails me."

"That's right, darling," said Mrs. Stapleton, taking

her hand and shaking it heartily. "Bravo! That's what I call having the courage of your opinions."

"Certainly! All the same I should like to see this wonderful genius. What is he like to look at, Vivian? Is he old, ugly, near-sighted, blind, lame?"

"Are you judging now from the standard on the pedestal?"

"Oh! isn't that vanity? as if your looking-glass didn't tell you."

"I don't know that I consult it."

"But I do," she said promptly. "External appearance," assuming an air of profound wisdom, "has a much greater influence on the physical force of men than of women. That was decided in the discussion of a thesis at 'Les Palmiers.' Not that the finding was needed by me, I had had a practical illustration before I left England."

Vivian shook his head.

"I see you're aiming at me, but I'm perfectly in the dark as to your meaning."

"What a misfortune that I cannot forget so easily." Stella's eyes were beaming with fun. "It has caused me much consideration as to whether my presence would continue to jar on your delicate sensibility."

"I see—yes—I had forgotten. Well, either my nervous structure is in a much stronger condition, or your personal appearance has undergone a very great improvement. Which can it be?"

"Ah, which! I wonder."

And the two looked at each other, measuring swords with their eyes.

"Darlings," exclaimed Mrs. Stapleton, in ecstasy. "How delicious to hear you sparring together. It may be selfish, but oh, Vivian, I hope your friend won't come here. To be just as we are — we three, able to talk and laugh and say what we please without thought, without reserve or *gêne* — ah, it is indeed Paradise to me."

"Of the three in Paradise, mother, one was the serpent. Is that part to be taken by either of us three?"

"Droll boy," said Mrs. Stapleton uneasily. "How terribly cynical you are. It's good your mother knows you so thoroughly."

"My mother must be very clever. It is more than I know myself. One of the charms of being with Rodney was our many discussions on that subject. It is so refreshing to be in touch with a mind whose views and ideas are entirely opposed to your own."

"Really! Well there, you surprise me."

"I thought you knew me so thoroughly, mother."

"Not in that way, dear, I don't," said Mrs. Stapleton humbly; adding after a pause, "You're not vexed, Vivian, are you, at my saying I did not want your friend here?"

"My friend has no intention of coming here, dear mother. Had you given me an opportunity you would have heard that he has an invalid friend stop-

ping at Bex — a place not far from here — and it is probable that he may pay him a visit there.”

“And you would wish to ask him over,” said Mrs. Stapleton eagerly.

“No, I should wish nothing of the kind, and there could be no necessity, as I shall go to Bex myself. It was my intention to ask you to accompany me, but — ”

“Oh, Vivian, no buts, I pray. Why, Stella and I have been living on the thought of spending some little time with you.”

“Never mind, Marraine, dear ;” and while Stella put her arm round her coaxingly, she turned her eyes full of reproach on Vivian. “The church-yard is close by, and if he breaks both our hearts by not taking us to Bex, we’ll be buried side by side there. Then perhaps he’ll repent him of his cruelty.”

CHAPTER IX.

OF course they all went together to Bex, but first they spent a week at Territet — a week which flew for Stella and, would he have confessed it, seemed to have wings for Vivian.

Lent being over, and the season drawing to a close, the gaiety at the Grand Hotel was fast and furious. Excursions, tennis matches, driving parties were made for every day. The evenings were taken up in dancing, acting, rowing on the lake with the moon's pale light shimmering on all around, and the far-off voices of the Neapolitan singers falling softly on the ear.

To those who have well-nigh drained the cup of pleasure, amusements such as these are wearisome and stale, but to Stella, fresh from school, feeling for the first time the potency of her youth and beauty, every hour was happiness, which she enjoyed to the full.

Mrs. Stapleton was in a kind of blissful dream, hardly able to realize that it was Vivian actually — her son — who was taking a share in these trivial gaieties. Condescending to find amusement in the attention paid to Stella. Bringing that great mind

of his down to their level by his teasing quips and jokes of the homage shown to her. Begging to be told to which of the suitors he was expected to show favour. *Princesse, Comtesse, Baronne*, — which title did she prefer? As if he was blind to what every one else saw — the preference she had for him. Stella appealed to him now as she had done when she was a little girl, and received his decision as something from which there was no appeal.

Vivian himself was more than surprised at the unexpected feeling Stella had created in him. Had he met her in other surroundings, it is probable this interest would not have been roused, but to wish to possess that which others coveted was natural to his disposition, to be envied was delightful to him. Two or three of the men who hovered round Stella bore names of European repute. To be credited with such rivals was an honour, and quite enough to stir up thoughts of love in Vivian's breast. His mother never missed an opportunity of dropping hints about Stella's adoration of his talents, and of her devotion to his memory, and though Vivian could not quite recognize love in this outspoken affection, he began to put faith in what he had no doubt would gradually grow in reality. Hitherto marriage for him had seemed improbable, or the possibility was in such a remote future that its contemplation possessed no interest. Sudden events had caused a revolution in these ideas. He found himself pic-

turing a house of his own — contemplating with satisfaction a new *rôle* in which he might attract attention. With a wife — here Stella came in, and in thought he held out the sceptre to her — he would establish a salon which should be a veritable centre of the fine arts. There should be gathered the cream of literary and artistic London. Poems, pictures, plays, novels, should be there read and discussed, and the judgment passed should be the key to open the door to fame, or to lock out the intruder.

These Utopian fancies gave colour to much of Vivian's complaisant behaviour — a sprinkling of foreign titles would add *éclat* to an assembly — and he quickly contrived to make himself sufficiently popular for him to be included in the regret felt at bidding them farewell.

At their departure Stella was half-smothered by the bouquets given and sent to her. Quite a crowd assembled on the platform to take leave of them. "*Au revoir*" was shouted as the train moved out from the station, and "*Au revoir*" they sent back in return.

"Positively an ovation," said Mrs. Stapleton excitedly. "My dear child," addressing Stella, "I hope after this you will not find Bex frightfully dull." In her excitement she had actually for a moment forgotten Vivian.

"Dull, Marraine!" answered the girl, all aglow

with pretty vanity. "How could I? I shall have you there, and, until his friend comes, there will be Vivian all to ourselves. Fancy!" and she turned her smiling face to him.

To her surprise Vivian, who sat opposite to her, took her gloved hand and raised it to his lips.

"That's a very pretty speech from you," he said smilingly.

"And a very pretty action from you," she said, her eyebrows raised in pleased surprise. "Oh, I do feel like a real right-down grown-up young lady now. Dear me! I wonder if I can be myself, eh!" and she tapped the hand he still held. "Are you Stella Clarkson? That atrociously ugly girl who upset the nerves of *somebody*?"

"Stella!" exclaimed Mrs. Stapleton, "that's unkind. I call it vindictive in you."

"Oh, mother, how I wish you would learn to hold your tongue;" and Vivian cast a look full of irritation at her. "We're quite able to fight our own battles, she and I, without interference from anybody; these vexatious little speeches come like dashes of cold water on one."

"I'm so sorry," said Mrs. Stapleton humbly; "but you see, dear, it was I who told her."

"What if you did? Don't you think she is perfectly aware of the different effect she produces now? I won't say," he said, turning his eyes on Stella fixedly, "that *somebody* may not still have a com-

plaint to make of the vibration caused to sensitive nerves by the sight of Miss Stella Clarkson."

She freed her hand and deprecatingly held up the two.

"It frightens you?" he asked. "Oh, it need not do so. Have you never heard of courting pain because some pains mean pleasure?"

The colour slightly deepened in her cheeks, for a moment an anxious expression shadowed her face, then rallying quickly she said —

"Oh, I know — I believe it is, Vivian, that you are writing a play, or a poem."

"I am looking at a poem," he said meaningly.

She shook her head. "Marraine, now Vivian has caught the Territet complaint, and is dosing me with vague compliments and flatteries. Perhaps," laughing at him, "you think after such a surfeit I ought to be let down by small degrees, but you need not trouble yourself to do violence to your feelings. I am supported by my love of truth, and I'd much prefer the truth from you than this laughing in your sleeve at me; it is not becoming in persons who are mounted on pedestals."

"But persons on pedestals are human."

"Are they? You see, I never knew but one."

"And that one was —"

"Was you, and is still. Oh, I've never taken you down."

"Then I shall have to come down."

"Why? To where?"

He leaned his head towards her, and with a look full of meaning, said —

"If I told you — to kneel at your feet — what would you say?"

Stella drew back as if alarmed. "Vivian! what is the matter with you?"

"Ah! what! That is a question I keep putting to myself, but no answer is given to me. I thought you might help me to find a name for my condition, for I strangely suspect it is a complaint common to men and to women. No, you cannot assist me? cannot guess the disease — here," and he laid his hand on his heart, "that I may be suffering from?"

"No, I don't know," she said hurriedly, "I don't understand."

Still keeping his eyes fixed on her, he began first to smile and then to laugh. "Do you know that that startled look of bewildered surprise is very becoming to you?"

"I really wish you would not say such things, Vivian. You can't fancy that I expect flattery from *you*."

"Flattery! No — I am only telling you what I expect others have told you before me."

"Oh, well, if you mean to class yourself with *others* I have nothing to say."

"Ah, but I have," and taking her hand he pressed it in his own tightly, "only this is not the place to

tell the tale in. We will wait until the afternoon, and try to discover a pretty walk together."

Stella felt her face grow red and white by turns. A troubled feeling set her heart beating quickly. Was the sensation pain or pleasure? She could not tell. She only knew that Vivian was opposite, and that his eyes were still fixed on her, watching her attentively; that Mrs. Stapleton sat with her head turned away, gazing most ostentatiously out of the window, and that she herself, wishing to plunge into some general topic of conversation, could not think of a word to say.

This condition remained unaltered until they reached Bex station, where the bustle of arrival and the cares of luggage put to flight sentimentality, and took Vivian off to make certain that Clements had seen that all their boxes were taken out of the train.

Mrs. Stapleton seized the first moment that she and Stella were left together.

"Darling," she murmured, taking Stella by the arm, "I am so happy. Of course I saw what was coming, but I hardly dared to hope it would be so soon. All I trust is, that this Mr. Rodney won't interfere with anything. I'm so thankful that I've got one of his books. I shall read it at once, and have something to talk to him about, for we must contrive that he is told off to me. I wish he was not so clever, but these clever people are so self-

contained that if you let them talk about what interests themselves you are sure to get on."

Those who know Bex in spring know the wealth of its idyllic charms seen at each turn, and from every point of view.

It was early in May when our party reached there, and looking at that vast stretch of meadow which fills the valley for as far as eye can reach, there hung over every tree a mantle of white blossom. Below, the grassy sward was carpeted with flowers, thick as the lush grass they overtopped and hid from view. All around the slopes and hills were clothed with trees, whose budding leaves showed every hue of varied green; and springing from out these verdant thickets, there rose the snow-capped peaks of the two great mountains, at whose feet this emerald in the crown of "smiling Switzerland" lies nestled.

The rooms chosen, Vivian, as well as Stella and Mrs. Stapleton, felt an unconscious desire to be alone. A disturbing element seemed to hamper common-place every-day conversation; each one avoided the eyes of the other, fearing the betrayal of a look in which some meaning might be read. Mrs. Stapleton was the only one who was secure in the certainty of satisfaction. Vivian, in conformity with his character, was pricked by the thorns of doubt. Had he been wise? had he been premature? Was marriage a state in conformity with

the views he held of life? And was Stella the woman he ought to choose?—reasonings which showed him to be no true lover, for love ever brings distrust of self. The one fear is that the object we aspire to is beyond our grasp—the heart we covet too precious to be exchanged for that which has gone from out our keeping.

Stella on her side was agitated by a tumult of mixed emotions, through each of which ran the desire that Vivian had not spoken of these things—at least not yet. She did not say it to herself in words, she did not consciously form it into thought, but the truth was that she had only just found her wings and she wanted to enjoy liberty. The bare idea of Vivian in love, and with her, was an honour too overwhelming to be borne with equanimity. Vivian's wife had always been to her an impossible ideal of perfection—"and that he can have chosen me—Never. He must have been practising some poetry he has in his head; making me serve, as he used to, for his model." Her heart grew lighter at the thought, a treachery to allegiance which she reproved by impressing on herself the various reasons why such a gifted being should not stoop to her; and she ended by saying, "Oh, he'll find this Mr. Rodney here, and talking with him will drive the other out of his head. Only I must warn Mairaine not to drop a hint or give a look. That would annoy Vivian dreadfully." And this so far satisfactorily disposed of,

Stella's thoughts wandered away, wondering as they went what love could really be. The silly flatteries that some of her late admirers had whispered into her ears had only made her smile—the present episode with Vivian so touched her pride that it almost frightened her—but nothing yet had reached her heart. Had she a heart to reach? The doubt brought a sigh, but the sigh found no echo from within: and plunging deeper down the young girl was caught in the mazes of fancy and held captive by dreams, the soft languor of which seemed still to pervade her long after she had roused herself to the tangible interests of life.

Later on, going to the sitting-room, Stella found that Vivian had just joined Mrs. Stapleton. The book he had disturbed her reading she still held in her hand. It was a volume of short sketches by Maynard Rodney.

"Oh, Stella!" she exclaimed gleefully, "his friend has left, so he won't come here now—Mr. Rodney, dear, I mean—and really I must confess to feeling a wee bit thankful. It's because of these stories I'm reading," and she turned apologetically to her son. "Oh, Vivian, they are so cynical; of course, I dare say they are very clever, but all the wrong people get the right things, and the ones you want to be very happy are made miserable. Has he had any

great disappointment himself that he should hold such pessimistic ideas?"

"Disappointment!" and Vivian gave a little laugh, which tossed such a supposition to the winds. "If success can satisfy a man, Maynard Rodney has nothing left to wish for. I know no one I should be so willing to change places with."

"Well, I dare say he would not object," said Stella. "I know heaps of people who used to envy you. But is he not coming, Vivian? Are we not going to have a sight of this paragon?"

"I fear not; there is no letter for me, and by what I can gather from the porter, the friend he was coming to see has gone off to some other place."

"Oh, how tiresome! You will be sorry, won't you?"

"Well, shall I? I don't quite know;" and then moving over nearer to her, he added, "that will depend very much on how you treat me."

"I!" she said, striving to overcome a troubled feeling which had seized her.

"You," he answered, pleased with her confusion. "Now, will you get your hat? I have found the walk we are to take together."

CHAPTER X.

"He is waiting for you in the hall, dear," said Mrs. Stapleton, as Stella, dressed for the walk, came back to the sitting-room. "He was too impatient, I believe, to stay here with me." The girl stooped down to give her a kiss in good-bye. Mrs. Stapleton folded her in her arms. "Oh, Stella! oh, my dear child," she cried in a voice broken with emotion, "this happiness that I see in store for us both is almost too much for me. Now I can love you as much as I want to; hitherto I have felt half afraid. I feared something might take you away from me, might prevent your being my real daughter."

"Whatever happens I shall always be that, Mar-raine. So long as I live you shall share my heart with my mother."

"You think, then, that you will have enough left for us still to have a little bit of it?"

"I am sure I shall."

"And yet I want you to give Vivian all the affection and devotion you possess. It is that you are going to do, are you not, dear child?"

"I think you must let *him* ask me that question."

"Of course — I know — forgive me, Stella. Hap-

pininess is running away with my tongue, but you will make allowances for me. You know what a silly old goose I am with the two who are all the world to me."

Stella let a kiss give her reply. Her eyes were full of tears. Hers was a nature which quickly responded to any emotional sympathy.

"Go now, darling," whispered Mrs. Stapleton. "My heart and my hopes will be with you."

Stella gave a farewell nod and went out of the room, heaving a sigh as soon as she had closed the door after her. What was it that made her feel so troubled and dull, as if some calamity was going to happen to her? Mechanically she went down the stairs, but so soberly that the heaviness seemed to have even got into her heels.

At another time Vivian would have been very quick to take notice of her lagging steps, but just at present he too was occupied by thoughts that rather weighed on him. He was a strange mixture, this young man — at once a creature of impulse and a slave to doubt. Very eager to obtain anything he much desired, he was ardent in pursuit until the object was within his grasp, then — with more knowledge of himself than most others had of him — he suddenly paused to ask himself, would possession bring satisfaction? he had flown after so many fancies which had proved to be burst bubbles. To-day two natures possessed him — each striving for mastery — and both pulled so vio-

lently that he determined to tempt fate by letting himself slide, and trust to nothing but chance, luck, and opportunity.

"The walk, I tell you," the porter was repeating — he had spent three months in London, and scorned to speak to the "Eengleesh" in any but their native language — "is a splendid walk ; for all around you could not find a morer splendid one."

Ah ! if the pen could be dipped in some magic ink which should show to those who read the wondrous beauty of the way along which Vivian and Stella were going.

Out in the open, on the road with its border of rich meadows, they each made an effort to talk in admiration of the scenery. Suddenly a turn brought them to where the glare of day was softened by the sky being hidden under the entwined boughs of the trees above. They had crossed the river, heard hitherto, now seen running by their side, singing sometimes in a soft murmur, then lifting up its voice to shout as its waters eddied round and dashed over huge stones and boulders planted with daisies or fringed with many a fern. Covering the bank down to their very feet was a tangle of wood-sorrel, periwinkle, hepatica, while great clumps of white and mauve toothwort bent their flowery heads as if to salute the intruders.

"It is not easy to keep up conversation here," Stella said at length, speaking with an effort.

"Eh," said Vivian, drawing closer to her. "What do you say — not easy to talk? No, it isn't; but we do not want to talk, do we?"

While speaking he had taken her hand and drawn it through his arm, and she knew that he had bent his head and was looking at her.

"I do not," she answered without raising her eyes, which looked straight in front.

"Neither do I; and yet there is something I would say to you. Questions I want to ask; an old story to tell; pleadings to make to you. I had them on my lips when I came out. Now, to put all that is stirred within me into words seems desecration. Surely the power is given to us beings of finer sensibilities and higher emotions to exchange hearts and vows and swear eternal fealty without being reduced to those common-place phrases, those set speeches which more vulgar minds count as the current coin of love. You follow me, Stella, do you? It would rivet the bond that draws me to you tighter, if I could feel certain that we were one in sharing this idea."

A deep-drawn sigh escaped Stella's lips as she battled with a troubled sense of nervousness and bewilderment. She thought that she understood to what Vivian was alluding, but it would have been easier far to answer a straightforward question.

"I am so young," she murmured, "and to me it seems so more than impossible that you should —"

"Should what?" he said; "tell me, dear one."

"Should love me," she said shyly; "for that is what I think you mean me to believe."

Even the gods, when they stepped down from Olympus, had to follow in love the fashion set by poor human beings, so that Vivian must be forgiven for sealing the assurance of this belief, which Stella gave him, like any common ploughman.

After an instant they started apart with a frightened dread that some one might be looking on; but none but the flowers and the birds were there, and no sound was heard save the swift stream's singing.

"I know how happy we shall be together," Vivian was saying. "You will again be my pupil, and I your teacher."

"I have never forgotten," said Stella, "the poetry — that is, your own poetry — that you taught me. I repeated that one beginning —

‘Lady, on whom the moon now looks,’

the very morning that I went to the station to meet you. Each movement of the hands and inflection of the voice came back to me. You must hear me say it. I love that poem dearly."

"You pretty flatterer," he said delightedly. "Oh, Stella, I know I shall worship you, and I shall be so proud to see you admired. For my sake you will have to make the very most of every charm you possess, so that you are spoken of as the beautiful

Mrs. Vivian Stapleton, whom all London is dying to know. Ah! between us, to quote our Yankee cousins, we'll make society hum."

A shadow seemed to pass over Stella, which made the smile she tried to give look rather wan and wintry.

"You're feeling tired," Vivian said. "When we get to the bridge there, I will leave you while I go on and see how near we are to the valley's head."

Finding a good-sized stone, big enough for Stella to sit on, Vivian went off at a quick pace, and was soon out of sight. It was so unusual for him to have quite so much consideration for those around him, that Stella felt gratified at this tribute paid to their new condition.

Left alone, she began to put to herself those questions which Vivian had called common-place, and almost unconsciously she left her seat, walked over to the bridge, and stood there, leaning her arms on the parapet of stone.

Everything around her was in harmony with this new-born emotion, which, if truth be told, Nature, more than Vivian, had quickened into being. In the spring-time of life the beauties that our eyes see our hearts leap up to, and Stella, intoxicated by the fresh loveliness of all she had been looking at, set down the happiness she felt to love for Vivian.

In love with love, the girl soon fell to dreaming; and lost to all about her, she did not move until a

rustle somewhere close by made her turn her head and see a young man who had come down through the thicket of trees from above.

Seeing that he had disturbed her, he raised his hat ; she made a little inclination in return, and resumed her position.

"What a nice face he has," she was thinking ; while he, man-like, was saying to himself, " Hang it all, I must try and get another look."

And he turned round, prepared to direct his eyes to admiration of the scenery should she be watching him. No, she was standing as he had left her—in expectation, so he thought, of some one joining her ; and having a vivid imagination, joined to an impressionable nature, the stranger—Maynard Rodney by name—set his fertile brain working to weave, as he went his way, a story which he would call "Waiting."

He was taking what he hoped would prove a short cut to Bex station from Les Plans, where he had been spending a few days with his friend. It happened that while in London he had heard who Vivian Stapleton was, and also that with his mother lived the girl who had taken from him Uncle Briggs' fortune.

"That puts an end to my increasing my intimacy with Stapleton," he had said ; "so if they are going to Bex I shall stay in London." And he had written to this effect to his friend—the man who had taken him round the world with him—who had sent for

answer, "I am moving up to a place called Les Plans, where you may join me in safety, secure from elegant Stapletons or young ladies with money."

On this Rodney had gone to Les Plans, and, his visit over, he was now on his way to arrange some business at Geneva, and then back to work and to London.

Fame sat very becomingly on this young man, who at heart was as modest and unassuming as he had ever been. In addition to the loss of the money he had been brought up to suppose himself heir to, Fortune had aimed at him many a venom-tipped "sling and arrow." There are few royal roads to success, and Rodney had gone through all the disappointment and bitterness of having some of his best work returned to him rejected and unopened. Of his family there was not one in sufficient sympathy of mind with him to even understand what it was that cast him down. He was very miserable. Suddenly a happy chance, a lucky turn of the wheel, and he awoke one morning to find he had caught the public ear, and found his way to its favour. Since then he had been rapidly mounting the ladder, and was now one of the most popular writers of the day.

CHAPTER XI.

THE whole of that evening, after Stella and Vivian returned, and best part of the following day, Mrs. Stapleton was kept on the tenter-hooks of anxiety. At length she could bear the suspense no longer, and finding Stella alone, she said, with pathetic entreaty in her tone —

“Is there nothing, dear, that you have to tell me?”

Stella's face overspread with crimson as with a feeling of self-reproach she answered confusedly —

“I believe — I think — that is, I am sure that everything is as you wish it to be.”

“Then Vivian did speak to you last evening?”

Stella laid her soft, glowing cheek against Mrs. Stapleton's, and turning so as to look in her face, she said with a little smile —

“You know, Marraine, dear, that Vivian has a horror of being conventional. He never does anything as ordinary persons do, so that you must not expect him to be different to himself in love-making; but — yes, I am sure we understand each other.”

“Oh, Stella, you have taken a ton-weight from off me. It is quite enough, dear child. I know — thank

you a thousand times for the confidence you have given me. I need not tell you it was not curiosity. I only wanted a word, but that word I dare not ask from Vivian."

"But you will speak to him now?"

"Would you like me to?"

"I should. I know by his talking of what we are to do when we are married that he considers we are engaged; but I should not like to seem to look on that as perfectly settled until either he, or you, or I had written to my father and mother. It is not that I fear they will make any obstacle—indeed, I am sure they will rejoice at the prospect of seeing me happy—but, apart from my affection, I owe them that much respect, particularly as we are separated so strangely."

"Yes—certainly."

The words came out half-heartedly. Already Mrs. Stapleton scented trouble with her son. Years of separation, and the fact that he had never seen them, had, she felt sure, all but blotted out Stella's parents from Vivian's memory. Since the conversation they had had when Stella was to be sent to school, their very existence had never been so much as alluded to by him.

"You know, dear," continued the mother, after a moment's pause, "or perhaps you don't—for of late years, of course, you have not had any opportunities of hearing Vivian's opinions—that he has *the very*

greatest horror of hearing engagements talked of, and of being congratulated, and seeing paragraphs made about it for newspapers. I remember he used to say that that one thing alone would keep him for ever single, or that if he married he would propose to the girl one day and marry her on the morrow ; but all that was before he became captive to my Stella. I dare say he has changed now. Love is a mighty magician."

"But I don't know that I want him to change. I am quite one with him in my dislike of the publicity now given to persons' private affairs ; but there is a great difference between that and not asking your parents' consent."

"Oh, of course — every difference, certainly ; only the worst is that if a thing of that kind is once told, it seems certain to somehow or other ooze out. What I was thinking is, if we left it until our return, we can often so much better speak of a thing than we can write of it."

"Of some things, yes ; but I don't think of this one."

"Well, there, I am not so sure. However, I think I had better mention the matter to Vivian, and I fancy — particularly as it is my son — that it will be more my especial duty to write and inform your mother how happy you have made us all."

"Thank you ; only Vivian will have to write too. Men have always to ask the consent of girls' fathers."

"But, my dearest child, have you not already said

that we must not expect Vivian to be other than himself? and that is not like anybody else, as we both well know. Come, come, let us be as reasonable as we can. The thing for rejoicing is that the dearest wish of our hearts is happily settled, and knowing this, whether your good parents are told this week, or next, or the week after, little matters. Trust me, Stella. Have you ever known me forget what is due to your family?"

"Never. It is because you have been so good, and so mindful of me and of them, that I love you as I do. In the prospect of being Vivian's wife, half the happiness is thinking of the pleasure it will give to you, Marraine."

She said this with a naïve smile of content which made Mrs. Stapleton look at her with surprise. For a moment a dash of doubt came across her. Could it be anything but love that Stella felt for Vivian? Was she betraying any trust by not asking the girl to search her heart more fully? Where were those signs that, though more than a quarter of a century had passed, she remembered she herself had shown when first that wondrous mystery was born within her? She recalled her silence, her fitful moods, her desire to be alone that she might spread out her happiness and taste afresh its full delight; and she stole a glance at the fair young creature by her side, now laughing at the delight of some children over the tricks of a pretty pet dog.

"Oh, I must go over and pat him," she said. "Chum, Chum, will you dance for me? See, I've got a sweetie for you." Then half-way, turning back, she added—"Do you mind being left, Mairaine, if I go with the children for a game? There was a promise that if nobody was looking on I'd have a see-saw with them."

Mrs. Stapleton nodded smilingly, and again she fell to thinking. "It is not that she hasn't a heart," she was saying; "the question is, has he touched it?" For the first time she felt some uneasiness; she was conscious that as regarded one matter her moulding of Stella had been one-sided, the paramount desire to secure her for her son had made her in all questions of marriage or love turn the channel of conversation into his direction. This savour of reproach led to further self-examination, which soon became so tangled that Mrs. Stapleton, unused to this salutary discipline, made speedy search for some excuse, which she found by telling herself to remember how different from those of her day were the young people of the present time. Compare, for instance, Vivian with his father. How they had laughed at the way *he* had gone about telling every one of his engagement to her, asking them to congratulate him, saying that he couldn't believe there was another being in the world as happy as he was. Ah!—

"A penny for your thoughts, mother," said a voice

behind her. "What dream is making you smile and sigh at the same moment?" and Vivian seated himself by her side.

"I was thinking of your father," she said softly, "and the days when we were young."

He took her hand and pressed it in his own.

"Of the time when we were first engaged," she continued, "and what perfect happiness we felt in the love we had for each other. Ah, it must seem strange to you. Never having seen us young, you can hardly realize that a time was when our hearts beat with a passion equal to your own. Your father," and she brushed a tear away, "was a very ardent lover, and I suppose I had a very romantic nature. I don't know" — and she looked at her son with a little smile — "but that I keep a bit of that still, for I have a very lively sympathy with all lovers."

"I am sure you have," he said warmly; "and you have shown it best to me by not speaking of what I dare say you have guessed or perhaps Stella has told you."

"My boy has said nothing to me."

The broken voice of a love that was wounded touched him.

"My silence was not from want of love or from want of confidence," he began; and then, altering his tone, he burst out with, "Oh, mother, how can I expect you to understand me when I am an enigma to myself? I would give the world to be as others

are. If, like Tom, Dick, and Harry, I could have fallen on my knees before Stella, and have said to her, 'I love you, I adore you, will you be my wife?' and then in a tumult of exultation have brought her to you and asked you to rejoice with the two happiest beings in the world, and to write to all your friends, and tell them to proclaim it on the housetops, and send it to all the papers, I should have acted as the contented, prosaic, common-place herd of mortals do, and every one — I fear yourself included — would have been satisfied and delighted with me. Only such a situation would drive me mad; the vulgar platitudes, the allusions, the being talked over, pointed at, discussed, would send me stark staring out of my senses. Before a week was over, I should be on my way to the heart of Africa or the North Pole."

Mrs. Stapleton drew a long sigh.

"But, Vivian, will you let me put this question to you? Do you look on yourself as engaged to Stella?"

"I look on us as affiliated in the fetters of affinity — I hate that word engaged. Ultimately we shall further strengthen the bond by being united in that spiritual sacrament called by the masses marriage."

Mrs. Stapleton paused for a moment, and then she asked —

"Does Stella thoroughly understand this? In speaking to me the words she used were, 'By the way

Vivian talks of what we will do when we are married, I see that he considers we are engaged.' "

"Just so; to you she is at liberty to call it what she pleases."

"That is the real fact of the case, though?"

"Certainly it is."

"Then, although at present you may not wish to announce it to the outside world, there are some from whom the secret cannot be kept long. For instance, have you forgotten that Stella has a father and mother?"

His face betrayed that that unpleasant fact had certainly escaped his memory.

"What, the people you mean who lived in some Grove?"

"The same people, my dear; and still living in the same Grove — Matilda Grove."

Mrs. Stapleton had braced herself up to do what she considered her duty.

"Where is Matilda Grove — in London?"

"It leads out of the King's Road at Chelsea. Naturally, and very rightly, Stella would wish to tell her parents. Then there are your uncles, her trustees, and her lawyer. Remember, the child is heiress to a considerable sum of money."

"That in no way influences me."

"I am sure of that. Still her family —"

"Welcome to whatever she chooses to do for them. I should not interfere if she gave them every penny

she possesses ; indeed it would please me far better to feel that everything my wife had, or wanted, or wore she would owe to me."

"That is like your generous nature, dear; and I am quite assured that when the proper time comes Stella will do all that is proper for her family."

"Just so, 'when the proper time comes,' and that is the time of our marriage. I hope that matters will so arrange themselves that there will be no need for any long delay; but until the date draws near I earnestly trust, for the happiness of us all, that this arrangement between us is kept secret by the three whom alone it can possibly concern."

"People are certain to guess," said Mrs. Stapleton, disappointed and far from convinced.

"Oh, to that I offer no opposition. Society is free to surmise, imagine, fabricate whatever romance it chooses; all I forbid is that it shall be told the truth. Nothing swells popular interest like mystery, and those I mix among are not prepared to see me act like other men."

Mrs. Stapleton smothered a sigh. Never before had she felt so at variance and so dissatisfied with her son. It was almost as if she felt the horrible suspicion that her idol might have feet of clay.

CHAPTER XII.

It happened that the day they left Territet Stella had posted a letter to her mother, so that, as Mrs. Stapleton said, if Mrs. Clarkson did not hear again for another fortnight she would not be uneasy.

Mrs. Stapleton had given herself twenty-four hours to think over the conversation which had passed between herself and her son ; but to her great satisfaction several days went by before Stella renewed the subject, and by this time her guardian was in a much more satisfactory position.

The weather was perfect, some enjoyable excursion was planned for each day, the arrangement of which suited the lovers admirably. The three drove together to some point where the horses were taken out to rest, Mrs. Stapleton was left to wander about, while Vivian and Stella went off for a good walk or a climb up the mountain.

With no one to pose before, and the certainty that the girl by his side looked on him as perfect, Vivian could permit himself to be natural, with the result that he proved a most agreeable companion.

In spite of his many faults and his pitiable weak-

ness, this discovery of his love for Stella was in reality a source of newly-found happiness. The dissection of love would often reveal much that would surprise us. There are those who cherish the emotion because of the pleasure they themselves derive from it, and the object who calls this state into being is dear to them for that fact only. Stella, too, was unconsciously the victim of self-deception. It was with her the spring-time of life, when every emotion, quality, affection is ready to burst from bud into flower. Sensitive in temperament, impressionable, ardent, Nature, as she saw it around her, spoke to her heart through her eyes; and unused to these new sensations, which stirred and thrilled her, it was not strange that she connected them with Vivian and misnamed them by the name of love.

When Mrs. Stapleton again spoke on the subject of writing to Mr. and Mrs. Clarkson, she saw that her task was an easier one.

"You see, darling," she said, "if we look the facts plainly in the face, we see that the situation is not an every-day one, any more than that Vivian is an every-day person — if he was, what matter? who would care? But there comes in the point that everything he does and each word he says is chronicled, and that, in this matter, he could not endure."

"Of course not, it would be dreadful."

"I felt sure, dear, you would see it so."

"Yes, but my father and mother are not like people

in society. If I tell them not to, they wouldn't breathe a word."

"I know, I said as much to Vivian ; and yet when he pointed out what would be our duty — he sees that always so very plainly—I could not shut my eyes to it again. You see our little bride does not come with empty hands to us ; there is that big fortune which the dear, romantic boy would like you to give every farthing of to your family, so that all you wished for might come as a gift from him."

"How generous!" said Stella, her own big heart responding to such a munificent idea.

"It is only like him. I never knew any one with such an absolute disregard of money, and yet so alive to its responsibilities, for he at once pointed out, what had escaped me, that if he mentioned this engagement to your parents, he must also inform your trustees and your lawyer."

"But why, Marraine? it makes no difference to them."

"It isn't that, dear ; but about money men are very particular, and seeing that with a fortune I am your guardian, and Vivian is my son, it is quite the right thing to do. It's what his father would have done ; indeed, I may say it's what he did do. When he proposed to me I was staying at my Uncle Hubert's, but nothing would do but he must go at once to my father, and he insisted that I should go too, and we went together."

"But that is what Vivian and I might do," exclaimed Stella, a light seeming to burst upon her, "go and see them together. Vivian has never seen either father or mother. It would be much better than writing. Thank you for the suggestion, Mairaine. It will be much nicer to go, and then, unless we want to, a word more need not be said to any one."

Mrs. Stapleton cooked up a report of this conversation to give to her son, and the matter being for the time settled, they enjoyed another ten days at Bex, and then at Vivian's suggestion returned by way of Geneva to Paris, where a week of dissipation was indulged in. Each day they passed together seemed to increase Vivian's attachment, shown by more open acts of devotion in proportion to the admiration she called forth in others. Some of the people they met — people whom they had known before — spoke loudly in Stella's praise, and predicted she would be one of the attractions of the forthcoming season. It was more than her beauty which charmed these admirers — it was her freshness, the genial spontaneity of her words and actions, which made her seem to older and more jaded eyes the perfect embodiment of youth. Never had Vivian so completely thrown aside self as during this stay in Paris. He was a real lover in the efforts he made to please Stella and to give her pleasure, and each day seemed to draw them nearer together. When she and Mrs. Stapleton set

off to purchase the presents they were taking home, Vivian threw over an engagement to accompany them. Stella had merely said, "I wish you were going to help us with your taste;" and the wish proved all-powerful to decide him. At the different shops he was full of admiration and interest.

"You must first tell me," he said, "for whom these gifts are — man, woman, child? Degree — high or low?"

"Well, to begin," said Stella, "I want something for my mother, she always comes first with me; then there is father; after that, two sisters; and last, but not least, a young sailor brother."

"All belonging to you?" asked Vivian, in evident amazement. "Sisters! a brother! No, but really, is that so?"

"Certainly. Oh, you thought I was the only one. Now, that shows how little interest you have taken in me."

"On the contrary, it shows that all my interest was centred in you. I hope, however, that the sisters are not like you. I could not bear to think there existed another being who resembled you in the very smallest degree."

Mrs. Stapleton thought it was time for her to put in a word.

"My dear Vivian," she said, "it will tax all your credulity to believe that they and Stella are connected in the remotest way."

"Oh, that's all right," he said carelessly, and, without making another remark on the subject, he turned to the question of the presents, by asking Stella what form she wished them to take.

"Well, I thought — as I had been away from them so long — to mark my return, and perhaps something connected with it," and there was a coy glance and a rosy blush, "I should like for each to have some little article of jewellery which they could wear as a gift from me."

"I should choose, then, something rather plain and useful," put in Mrs. Stapleton practically.

"Oh, no, mother," and Vivian leaped up in Stella's regard at least twenty degrees, "people can buy for themselves what is plain and useful. A gift should be something which it might be extravagant to purchase for ourselves, but which we long to have. I vote that we search for the very prettiest trifles in the shop."

A little gloved hand stole over and clasped his fingers tightly. That was just her idea, exactly what she wanted, and Vivian was gratified by seeing the sweet face beam with pleasure. As she said afterwards, "Had it been for the Queen he could not have taken more trouble than he did about the locket for mother, and those pretty bangles for Lottie and Carry; and then, although father was so plain in his dress, she felt sure he would wear a pin, and Edgar would be delighted with his compass — so exactly

suited to a sailor — set with diamonds, very small, but oh, so bright, all round.”

“You *have* been good to me to-day,” she said, as, after looking the presents over again, she put away each in its case. “Vivian, I often wonder what has made you choose me. You are so clever and perfect in every way, and I — I am just a simple little girl, and nothing more.”

“And a simple little girl you shall remain to me, but I shall make you ‘The Cynosure of neighbouring eyes’ to every one else.”

She shook her head. “No, no ; do not be too ambitious. I only want to please you. I have no wish for the admiration of others.”

“Yes, but by gaining admiration you *will* best please me. I want people’s heads to be turned about you — to see you a real society craze, with every one talking about how you looked, and copying what you wear. Come, come, don’t look so frightened ; by that time you will belong to me, I shall always be with you. I dare say they will not leave me out in the cold, some distinction and notoriety is pretty safe to fall to my share.”

“I know it will, and that is what makes me say that it will be sufficient for me to be your wife.”

He smiled, and, putting his hand under her chin, bent down and looked into her face. What he saw evidently satisfied him, for after a pause he said —

“Do you know that I begin to believe that I am a very fortunate fellow ?”

Stella did not need to ask him in what way. After a time she, giving a happy sigh, said —

“For many things I am glad we are going home, but I am very sorry to leave here, Vivian; we shall always look back with pleasure on this time in Paris.”

“We shall indeed,” he said; “to me it has been the happiest week in my life. Nothing has gone wrong, there has been nothing to jar upon me. Stella, we will give the gay city its reward — it is here we will spend the first week of our honeymoon.”

“Very well; but that will not be yet awhile, you know.”

“I mean it to be before very long. I see nothing to be gained by waiting.”

For want of a reply Stella said —

“I see advertised in the new magazine a story by your friend Mr. Rodney, which is called ‘Waiting.’”

“Ah! Rodney. Yes, I had forgotten. I must look him up as soon as we get back to town.”

CHAPTER XIII.

ONCE back in London, old interests and associations laid their hands on Vivian, so that when Stella proposed that he should accompany her to Matilda Grove, she was met by the answer that for the present it was absolutely impossible. "Some time next week I will try and find an hour, but I have come back to a pile of letters so high, almost every one of which entails an interview or makes an appointment."

"You see, for me to wait," said Stella disappointedly, "is out of the question. What would they think if I did not go at once to see them? Besides, I am so anxious myself to do so."

"I admit it is odiously provoking." Vivian's abstracted air suggested that his thoughts were far away. "The only alternative I can see is that for this once you should go without me."

"But I wanted you to speak to them."

"I know, so did I. Still surely that will wait until another opportunity. At all events, dear, you must see that I cannot go now. Impossibilities are impossibilities, even to me."

"Very well," she said coldly, "then I will go alone."

"Do," he said, with an irritatingly sweet smile. "If the wish is so imperative, I think it quite the better way."

Stella kept back the severe remark she was inclined to make, and her pride helped her to repress her tears. She was sorely disappointed; she had counted very much on this introduction of Vivian to her parents. An uneasy feeling fretted her that Vivian would not have so treated persons in his own station; she was sensible of having received a wound to her *amour propre*. Added to this, there was the fear that from her allowing two days to pass without going to them, her mother might be hurt. In past times she — Stella — had been obliged to regulate her visits by her guardian's permission and convenience, but now she was comparatively a free agent, with a maid and a carriage at her disposal. True, with the well-bred courtesy nice girls like to show, she still deferred her wishes to Mrs. Stapleton's plans; and that loving mentor, judicious in all matters of this kind, never made any opposition without an imperative reason.

Going into the room in which Mrs. Stapleton was sitting, Stella said, in a tone which told that something had gone wrong — "Marraine, will it inconvenience you if I take the small brougham this morning?"

"Not in the least, dear. Where do you think of going?"

Looking at the young girl she saw that her face was a little flushed, her head was held very high, and her lips were kept more close than they were wont to be. There was a tightened expression of the features that told that Stella was putting a strain on herself.

"To see my mother. I reproach myself now that I did not go yesterday."

"But surely that is needless. I don't think your mother would expect you. I have always found her so very amenable to reason."

"Perhaps so. She may have schooled herself to expect very little, but now that I am grown up, and to a certain extent my own mistress, I want to show her that I hope to never forget the duty I owe to her and my father."

"A very proper feeling," Mrs. Stapleton murmured, while inwardly she was asking herself what could have happened. Possibly she made a shrewd guess, for she said, "Is Vivian going to bear you company?"

"No, I am going alone;" then, thinking she was speaking rather curtly, Stella added, "He is too much engaged — too busy."

"Dear, dear! I wish people would show him some little consideration. It seems to me that he is asked to do *everything* for *everybody*. You will have to put your foot down on this state of things from the first, Stella, and simply say 'No' to these never-ending demands on his time and his energy."

"I think it very little matters what I may do. If on an occasion like this Vivian can refuse to go with me to see my mother — a thing he knows I have set my heart upon — he is very unlikely to listen to any objection I may make upon minor matters."

"Stella — dear child. You are unjust."

"No, I am not, Marraine ; I am hurt."

"Now wait. I will go to him, and beg him to —"

"No, please don't. That would hurt me more, to see that any one could succeed where I have failed." Mrs. Stapleton stood irresolute, and Stella added — "I feel that I am not in a mood now to be very agreeable to anybody. When I come back I shall have had time to cool down. My visit will no doubt have soothed me."

"But when am I to expect you back, darling?"

"Oh, some time before dinner. I shall have luncheon with them, and according to the hour my father comes home, I shall tell Wallis to fetch me."

Mrs. Stapleton kissed Stella in return for the kiss she received from her. She was still hesitating what she had better say or do. Perhaps it would be wiser to let her go, for, to her, this ruffled temper in the girl was a new phase of her character.

"49, Matilda Grove," to the coachman, and stepping into the carriage, Stella took her seat and began to "chew the cud of sweet and bitter fancy."

Engrossed by her thoughts, she became suddenly

alive to the fact that they had turned out of the long road they had been driving down, and had all but reached her destination.

"Matilda Grove." Yes, it was Matilda Grove they were in, but how impossibly small the houses looked. Surely, since she last saw them they had shrunk; and then they looked so dingy and shabby. She had always pictured them as being rather nice and cheerful. Ah, there was the old brass knocker, that looked as bright as ever, and the steps as white as they had always been. In an instant she had ran up them, had knocked at the door, and was breathlessly waiting for it to be opened.

Without asking who was at home, she brushed past the woman, who stood flattened against the wall, ran into the parlour, out again, and then, in the little passage midway between up-stairs and down, she called out, "Mother, mother, where are you? It is I, Stella."

"Oh, my dearest child!" came from a voice below; "to think of all days you should have pitched on this one, and me in such a muddle."

"But never mind, I'll come down to you."

"No, my dear, no. Stop where you are; there isn't a place here fit for you to sit down in. I'll be up in a minute, as soon as ever I get my hands clear from the flour."

"But the flour won't hurt me."

"No, no, you stay," came from further off, accompanied by the sound of running water, showing that the cleansing operation had commenced.

"Things al'ays do go that awkward," said some one near, and Stella turned round to find a charwoman of the ancient order, who, on the strength of "having knowed your ma, miss, ever since you was that high," seized on this fitting moment to explain that "'tis all on account of Mary Ann, who'd run a needle into her knee, and's had to be tooked to the horspital, miss, and there they've kept her, so that it put everything on your ma, you see; and as—" But mercifully here Mrs. Clarkson appeared, and for the moment all was forgotten in the happiness of that meeting between mother and daughter.

"My darling," said Mrs. Clarkson, devouring with her eyes the radiant creature before her; "is it possible that you can really be my own dear little Stella? Why, stand up, *do*. You've grown so tall—you're so altered and so improved, I don't believe anybody but me would have known you. What will father say? He won't believe his own eyes."

"I'm going to stop to see him; so at what hour shall I tell the carriage to fetch me?"

"He won't be home before six to-day."

"That will do splendidly. I'll tell Wallis to come back for me at seven, that gives me plenty of time before dinner;" and she jumped up to go out and give her orders to the man.

"You don't think Mrs. Stapleton will mind?" asked Mrs. Clarkson anxiously.

"No, certainly not. You forget I'm not a little girl now, and I told her I should stop and have my luncheon with you."

Mrs. Clarkson tried to smile. Alas! poor soul, already her maternal joys were being clouded over by sordid cares. She was wincing under the pinch of poverty — not the poverty which can offer nothing, but that almost equally trying state in which one feels there is nothing fit to offer. Had Stella only come when things were as they usually were — straight and tidy, and the servant, poor Mary Ann, at home to send out for anything they wanted — it would not have mattered; but the truth was they were going to make their dinners by clearing the cupboard of anything they could find there, and in the few minutes she was resting, she was making a fruit-pudding "to help out with" for the girls.

"My dear," she began, as soon as Stella came back to the room, "I don't know what on earth I'm going to give you."

"Neither do I," and Stella laughed gaily as she unfastened her hat and threw it from her, "and I don't care a bit. Oh, isn't this the same old sofa?" and she sat down, trying it from end to end. "Yes, I'm sure it must be. I remember every hole and bump in it."

"You dear!" said Mrs. Clarkson, going over to her; "bless you."

Stella put her arms round her mother's neck, and looking into the face — lined and aged so as to both surprise and pain her — she said, "Oh, mother dear, I am so glad to be as old as I am. Very soon now I am going to get some real pleasure out of my money. You and father are to have a nice house, and he is to do nothing, only both of you to live as comfortably and happy as possible. And we will go together and choose such pretty furniture, and in exchange you will have to give this old sofa to me, to remind me of the time when I was only your little Stella."

"Ah, you will always be that to me, my dear."

"I know I shall — only, you see that sometimes it happens that some other person comes along who fancies he has a great right to have a very big share of you."

"A husband you must mean — but not for you already?"

"Well, not immediately."

"Oh, I hope he is a good, nice man, worthy of my treasure. Is it Mrs. Stapleton's son? I've often wondered whether that mightn't be. I saw long ago that that was the wish of his mother."

"And will it be my mother's wish too?"

"If you truly love him, my dear, it will."

"Oh, the wonder is that he should love me."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because he is so wonderfully clever, and sought after, and very good looking, and rich."

"Well, and ain't you clever too ; and though I, your mother, say it, if he walks London over he won't find a sweeter, lovelier face than this. And if he's rich, you have a fortune, so I don't know what a man can want that he won't get. I fancy it would be easy to find a good many who'd be only too glad to change places with him."

Stella gave a little satisfied laugh. "He would rather that I had no fortune. He would like me to give it all away, so that I might have everything I wanted from him."

"He isn't wanting in a kind heart, then!" said Mrs. Clarkson.

"He does not care a scrap for money."

"Ah, I expect then that he has always had plenty," and Mrs. Clarkson gave a little sigh. "'They that have shall get more' is an old adage and a true one here, for now he is going to get you."

"That is, if you'll give me to him, you know."

"Oh, he won't need to ask me."

"Indeed, but yes he will. Only that he was very busy I should have brought him with me to-day. To tell the truth, I was very much put out, quite angry because he did not come."

Mrs. Clarkson's face betrayed her feelings.

"Oh, my dear child," she said, "how thankful I am ! If he had come, what in the world should I have done ? No, now please try and have a little

thought for mother. There, you must consider that, in our small way, we ain't prepared without some warning for visitors. Glad as I should be to see him — and I hope I shall, too — I should be vexed indeed on your account for him to find us in the pickle we're in to-day. It's bad enough with you, but if he's at all like his mother — oh dear!"

"Why," said Stella anxiously, "I always thought that she was so nice with you."

"So she is; but — well, you see we live in two worlds, Stella, and when she'd told me all she had to tell about you, we'd nothing more to say. She knew nobody about me. I didn't know any of her friends, nor what she did, nor where she went. Poor lady! I often used to wonder which was the most uncomfortable of us two. I could better put up with it so long as the girls were out of the way — for she couldn't hardly bring herself to be civil to them — and your father didn't happen to be at home, for then in him you did see a fish out of water. It's not of any use," and she shook her head decidedly, "there'll never be anything in common between the oaks and the brambles. But while I'm letting my tongue go on running the pudding isn't boiling, for I ran up to you without a word to old Mrs. Rumball to put it into the saucepan; and those two girls, Lottie and Carry, will be home at one, with only an hour to go to and fro and eat their dinner in, so will you amuse yourself for a few minutes, my dear,

while I'm gone. There are two or three books about, but I don't know if they're the sort that you'll care for. They belong to Lottie's young man. He's in a newspaper office, and is a great reader. Now I won't be long gone, I'll soon be up again."

Stella tried to smile as her mother went out of the room. She wanted to say she would like to go downstairs with her and try and help her in some way, but something kept the words back. She was oppressed by the feeling that perhaps she was a little in the way, that in her own mother's house she was being treated like a stranger.

CHAPTER XIV.

STELLA returned to her guardian's house that evening in some ways a different being. A wave of very cruel experience had gone over the girl. The harrow of the inevitable had broken up those illusions which for years had been cherished by her. As a child she had accepted her condition without questioning; happy in the moment, she had neither regretted her past, nor inquired about her future; as her years increased, and her individuality developed, she began to add to her love for father and mother an interest in her family, which led her to look forward to the time when they would be again united, and be brother and sisters in more than name. The result of this visit, and of the time they had spent together, was that this bright bubble had burst and melted into thin air.

How terribly material cares are wont to interfere with real sentiment was shown in Mrs. Clarkson's treatment of her daughter. Anxious that Stella's eyes should not be offended by the disorder of the down-stairs apartment — undergoing "a regular turn-out" at the hands of Mrs. Rumball — no sooner

did Lottie make her appearance than she was despatched, and most willingly went, to get the best chop money could buy; and then, while the mother cooked it, Carry was sent up to the parlour to amuse, and talk to, her sister. The sense of difference between the girls, coupled with the knowledge that she wasn't dressed properly, weighed on Carry solely, and took away all her usual hilarity. The conversation was carried on by questions on the side of Stella, and giggling from her sister, suddenly interrupted by the appearance of Lottie with a tray, spread for Stella's luncheon, followed by the chop between two plates, carried triumphantly—in the knowledge of its being done to a turn—by her mother.

“Oh, mother, dear mother, why did you?” was all poor Stella could say. If she burst into tears, which she could hardly keep from doing, she would only distress them and make a scene. She began to grasp the situation—to realize her own position, to see that, under the inexorable law of such a division, she and those born of the same mother had nothing between them in common. Oh, the sadness of it! none the less bitter because it could not be altered, and was the fault of no one. Stella thought that almost the hardest task she had ever known was eating that chop, with Carrie and Lottie and her mother watching her. Each mouthful threatened to choke her, but she would not give in; she bravely

swallowed it all down, knowing that they thought what her mother kept repeating, that "she only wished it was something more tempting and like what she was used to." Alas! poor Stella.

The sisters having gone back to their duties, the afternoon passed better. Alone with her child, satisfied that all her wants had been provided for, Mrs. Clarkson became more her old self again. Inwardly she was the same sensible, warm-hearted, delicately-minded woman she had ever been, but life with its changes and anxieties, and that constant rubbing shoulders with those who lacked refinement, had produced its natural effect upon her. Neither in her appearance nor in her way of speaking was she as careful as she once had been. Having daily proof of the filial devotion and good sterling qualities of her two elder daughters, she gradually lent her countenance to whatever best pleased them; and in this way it happened, that the young men and women who came to their house now belonged to a more noisy cockney class than formerly she would have permitted them to choose for companions.

In conversation she spoke of the good deeds of the girls and of their unselfish love to her, making Stella's heart swell again towards her sisters; and then there was the story of Edgar to be told, how, when they had set their faces against his going to sea, he had threatened to run away from them, and actually had

hidden himself for the whole of one dreadful day; but in the evening the dear prodigal had come back and had fallen on their necks, and then they had given way, and father had managed to pay the premium for him.

"All that will be my affair now," Stella had said proudly.

"Oh, but, my dear, I don't think he'll want anything of you; he's getting on splendidly. He's on his way home, almost here, dear fellow! He never once forgets you; every letter, 'tis always his love to Stella."

Stella's eyes had brimmed over with tears. Leaning over to kiss her mother, she said, "I so want you all to love me."

"Love you, my darling child, why you're the very apple of all our eyes. The girls and me and your father doat upon you."

"Do you?" and the sweet tearful face was pressed closer to her. And then by that wonderful intuition of love the mother's eye seemed to penetrate into the daughter's heart.

"Ah, Stella!" she said, "ah, my precious child, I feel that the coming here and seeing us all again has been in a way a blow to you. 'Tis the price we've all got to pay for the money we thought 'twas right to accept for you. From the minute I gave my consent I foresaw this time would come, and every hour I've lived since I've known was pushing me farther away

from you." The arms round her neck hugged her tighter. "Not from your heart, my dear," she continued, answering the embrace; "I don't believe *that* could ever be; but we look on things in the way our bringing-up makes us, and we get as much used to what is elegant and refined as we do to what is coarse and vulgar. Now what I want from you is—don't strive too much against nature. Try and shut your eyes to what in the poor girls—more perhaps than in father and me—will grate upon you; say to yourself, their hearts are right and their natures are good, but it is the bringing-up they've had has made them different to me. Not, mind, that I believe you would ever have been what they are. From your very birth you were one by yourself like, a bit of delicate china among earthen pots and pans. It was seeing that, and how little you were likely to be fitted for roughing it in any way, that decided me and father to consent to your taking Uncle Briggs' money." Stella had lifted her face to listen better. Mrs. Clarkson looked wistfully into the depths of those brown eyes and then at the sweet expressive features. Laying her hand tenderly on the girl's head, she said, "Some day, Stella, when maybe God has blessed you with a little child, you will know what that giving up was to poor mother."

And it was after *this* that she could feel the discontent, the disappointment, the depression that

weighed on her spirits like lead? Poor Stella! she was at cross purposes with her humanity. She would not make just allowance for the effect that actions, speech, appearances produce on our sensibility. Her sisters absent, she could idealise and exalt their natures; but again with them, and the more familiar they grew, the more their manners grated on her. When her father joined them, after the first joy of meeting, it was the same thing—he seemed to put her at arm's-length from him. She felt that to them all she was as something to be placed under a glass case, to be worshipped there, when they had on their Sunday clothes and their best behaviour. Sure as she was that they loved her, she was equally sure that they would be relieved when the time came for her to go away, so that they might sit at ease and be natural again. Her heart had smote her to see how thin and haggard her father was looking. He had grown into an old man since their last parting, and the pin she had brought him from Paris seemed an insult and a mockery to the shabby clothes he was wearing. She understood now why Mrs. Stapleton had advised her to buy something plain and useful. As now, for the first time, she was seeing her family, so they had looked to Mrs. Stapleton from the beginning, and yet, even in their most intimate moments, she had never let drop a disparaging hint about any of them. Knowing so well as she did the fastidious tastes of her guardian, Stella's sore heart grew big with gratitude for the generosity shown by her.

When at length she arrived back again home, she went at once to her own room, allowed the maid to dress her, and then hastened to the drawing-room, where she found Mrs. Stapleton sitting. The picture made by this aristocratic-looking, elegantly-dressed woman, lounging with graceful idleness in a low velvet-covered chair, surrounded by pictures, flowers, and all the expensive luxuries which taste and money can command, struck a false note in Stella's overwrought temper. For a moment she saw another woman and another room before her, and she shut her eyes tight, trying to dispel the illusion.

"Oh, dearest, is that you back again?" Mrs. Stapleton stretched out her arms in greeting. "I never heard you come in, and here I was sitting fidgeting, fearing that something had detained you. The day has seemed so long without my birdie," and she drew Stella towards her. "What should I do without her? Tell me that you're glad to come back to your silly old Marraine."

Stella did not answer, and looking down, Mrs. Stapleton saw that the girl's whole body was trembling under the passion of tears which she could no longer control.

"Darling child, my sweet one! Nothing wrong has happened to distress you?"

"No, no," she sobbed. "I can't tell what ails me. There is nothing the matter—only—just let me have a good cry with my arms round you."

"My love," murmured Mrs. Stapleton; and then she began to softly stroke the girl's hair and to pat her back, crooning over her all the while as if she was a baby. In the midst of this the door was opened by Vivian. His mother put her finger on her lips, with a little movement of her eyes to him. He came quickly over to them and knelt down by Stella's side.

"It isn't that there's anything the matter," said Mrs. Stapleton, keeping up her soothing tone, "but it's a long time since she saw them all, and I fear the strain and excitement has been too much for her. I noticed," and she turned to her son, "that she was not her usual self when she went out."

"And I fear I disappointed you, Stella." Her face was still hidden on his mother's neck. He took one of her hands and held it in his own. "I have been so sorry since. You had not left the house two minutes when I was repenting bitterly. You know how, for the moment, I get entirely lost in what I'm engaged upon. Not that I offer this as an excuse, for there is none to be made for me. I ought to have put everything else on one side to go with you." He paused and pressed to his lips the little hand he held. "Say you forgive me, dear," he murmured, bending nearer to her; "I feel so unhappy at having distressed you, and the very first thing to-morrow you shall take me to see your father and mother."

Mrs. Stapleton's face beamed with ecstasy at this

proof to her of her son's devotion. She loosened her hold of Stella, who raised her head and turned towards Vivian, though without looking at him.

"There is nothing now to forgive," she said, in a voice that was still broken, "although at the time I did feel very hurt, but perhaps after all it happened for the best, and I don't think that for the present there will be any need for you to see my father. Later on, when things are more settled, we will speak of it again."

He bowed his head. "It is for you to decide," he said; "I put myself completely at your service."

"Thank you," said Stella, returning the pressure of his hand.

"Now then, let us see the good that dinner will do;" and the two women rose together, Vivian at once encircling Stella with his arm.

"Rest your head on my shoulder," he said tenderly, but Stella had turned towards Mrs. Stapleton.

"Marraine, you must be on this side of me."

"No, dear."

"Yes, mother, come. Lay your hand on my shoulder — so. Now we have our treasure between us."

And thus entwined they led Stella out of the room.

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CHAPTER XV.

IF the sorrows of youth are sharp, they are mercifully evanescent. It is only in riper years that we carry our burden packed up, hidden from sight, but ready to spread out afresh in each moment of solitude and leisure.

For several mornings Stella awoke with that feeling of heart-heaviness which makes us alive to trouble before we remember what that trouble is. If she could have explained her feelings, or have spoken of them in any way, it might have given her relief ; but *that* her love, her pride, everything within her, forbade her doing, and Mrs. Stapleton, finding her more silent, less gay, and that beyond saying it pained her to notice the alteration in her father and mother, she never once remarked on, or alluded to, her home-visit, made a very shrewd guess that the depression was caused by the shock she had received at the increased and patent vulgarity of her family. The suspicion of there being a dark speck in Stella's blue heaven of happiness was enough to rouse all Mrs. Stapleton's sympathy, and with loving art she laid herself out to win her charge to a more enviable mood. Vivian too, determined to make amends, showed himself in

his best character. He was beyond measure surprised to realize how greatly the sight of Stella's distress had affected him, and he had continued to repeat to himself that he must really be very much in love, far more than for him he could have thought possible; and that the being who exercised such a fascination must certainly prove a most interesting study.

Consequent also on their return was the pleasant distraction of having to get new clothes, and a great portion of each day was spent by the ladies in shopping or with the dressmaker. Hitherto it had been an easy matter to choose a new frock for Stella, but now Vivian's taste had to be consulted, with the result that the effects were most bewitching. Stella must have been dead to vanity had she not been gratified by the interest he showed in the smallest detail of everything she was going to wear; and his outspoken compliments of how admirably her dress became her, were given in a way that conveyed more than flattery. One afternoon, about a fortnight after their return from abroad, Vivian came home earlier than usual. It was the hour for tea, and he ran up to the boudoir to find his mother and Stella sitting there together.

"I was right," he said, "in presuming that you had no engagements for this evening?"

"None, dear — why?"

"Well, because it entered into my head that we might all like to go to the play."

"Oh, how nice!" exclaimed Stella.

"Where?" asked Mrs. Stapleton.

"They are doing a piece that's begun to be very much talked of at the Thespis, and as luck would have it, at Mitchell's I found a box which had, at that very moment, been sent back."

"And did you take it?"

"I did. What are you going to give me for doing so, eh?" and he bent towards Stella.

"Why, a cup of tea," and she began to busy herself with the cups, "with an extra lump of sugar perhaps, and a big share of cream."

"Not good enough," he said, with a shake of his head. "I want something better."

"Better! Well, cake?" and she pointed with her finger to one near. "No — bread-and-butter — not that either? Oh, sweeties," in a voice of triumph, "they are close to you."

"So they are," and he feigned to reach over to them, but instead of so doing he raised his hand, drew her head towards him, and softly kissed her cheek. "That is my payment — trying to steal some of this delicate sea-shell pink."

Stella gave a little smile. "Marraine, do you see? Isn't he growing bold? and before you too."

Mrs. Stapleton affected to be shocked. In her heart she felt a thorn of discontent. Why did the girl take the caress so calmly, and without any of the signs of love's confusion? She knew that Vivian

was very chary of his endearments, but that was not Stella's case. "Ah me!" she said, seeing that the two had seated themselves at the table, "I really do not believe that now young people have a spark of romance left in them. Lovers were different in my day."

"How, Marraïne?"

"Oh, in a thousand ways, dear. We used always to be stealing off for moonlight walks, or star-gazing together. I suppose people are so clever now that they don't care about these things, but I must confess that in love-making I like the old fashion better than the new."

"What do you say, Stella," said Vivian, laughing, "shall we put it to the trial? After the play to-night will you walk home with me, and let me give you a lesson in astronomy?"

"And spoil my frock perhaps — no, no, no; but that reminds me, what am I to wear?"

"Something very pretty and simple."

"And white?"

"Certainly; as usual, I want you to look your very best."

"Well, I will say in the matter of dress you young men now bear off the palm. So long as I had a dress on," and Mrs. Stapleton heaved a sigh, "your dear father never knew of what it was made. He used to speak of everything as being bombazine. Pretty clothes were completely lost on him."

"Well, they're not lost on Vivian, so we score one there ;" and turning to him, she added, "Madame Berthe has just sent home the new frock that you made her a design for. Shall I —"

"Oh, Stella, dear. No — that's far too good."

"Mother, indeed it is not ; I want her to look a vision of loveliness to-night. Stella, I know will do her best to please me."

Stella dropped a little mock curtsey.

"I don't know what she would not do to please you," said Mrs. Stapleton approvingly. "She is spoiling you."

"No, I am not."

"You let him have all his own way."

"Because his way is the best way. Some day it will be my turn — then he will have to give in to me. Oh, don't fear, Marraine ; I shall prove myself an autocrat yet, and my sceptre will be a rod of iron."

When Stella came, dressed, into the drawing-room, Vivian had not a single fault to find. In every way his self-approbation was gratified. The material of the gown was his choosing, it was made after a design of his own, the charming girl who wore it was his promised wife. In the perfection of this possession he felt — as he seldom felt — a thoroughly happy man. And in this enviable frame of mind they set off for the theatre, and took their seats in one of the best-placed boxes in the house.

The play, *Love's Victory*, was perhaps not of the very highest order, but it contained situations so true to human nature as to touch a vibrating chord in many sensitive hearts. The third act was just over, the curtain had come down.

"Well!" exclaimed Vivian, who, facing the stage, had sat behind Stella; "it will have to go better than that if they want me to praise them. False art — badly constructed all through."

Stella did not answer, she was trying to regain her composure. During the scene she had sat spell-bound, lost to all about her. The great tears had gathered in her eyes and had hung trembling on the dark lashes.

From the stalls a man had been watching her, drinking in the changing expressions of that mobile face. The scene over, he stood up and turned to look at the box.

"By Jove, if that isn't Rodney there," cried Vivian, waving his hand to somebody below.

"Which?" said Stella, "where?"

But Vivian was already preparing to go out. "I'll fetch him up and introduce him to you; and, mother, make an opportunity to ask him to dinner, and get him to name a day next week."

Stella continued with her eyes fixed on the stalls, wanting to see whom Vivian would join. She was still watching when the box-door opened and Vivian reappeared.

"Mother, I have brought Mr. Maynard Rodney to present to you." Mrs. Stapleton murmured something about the great pleasure it gave her. "Miss Stella Clarkson," added Vivian, and Maynard Rodney held the little hand that had taken from him his fortune.

"I hope you are enjoying the piece," he said, addressing her.

"I am. I suppose I ought not to. Mr. Stapleton says that so far it is not at all clever, but you see I am not so critical as he is."

"You are younger."

"Does that make a difference? Then I am glad to be young, because that last act was so interesting to me. I thought it was so pathetic and touching."

"Stella, how can you say so?" exclaimed Vivian; "the dialogue was miserable."

"It seemed to me," said Mrs. Stapleton, "that the situation was very forced."

"Oh, both of you against me! Mr. Rodney, cannot you say some little word in its favour?"

"Indeed I can. I admire the play."

"You do," she said animatedly, "then I cannot be so very stupid after all. Oh, I don't mind now. I will confess the truth. I wiped away a tear. I was so glad, Vivian, that you could not see me."

"Silly little goose!"

"Ah, never mind, *Mr. Rodney* and I agree — but

the curtain's going up;" and she quickly took her seat again.

"No, why should you go down?" Vivian was speaking to Maynard Rodney; "there's a vacant chair, and of course you've seen it all before."

Rodney hesitated for a moment, and then he sat down. He said to himself that he should like for curiosity's sake to see a little more of this young girl. At the first glance he caught of the face he recognized it as the one he had seen leaning over the bridge at Peuffaire. How strange! and yet why strange?—the world was small, the arm of coincidence long. It was easy to guess by Stapleton's manner that a little romance had begun, and without knowing why, he drew a long breath which sounded like a sigh.

"Awfully boring," said Vivian, thinking he was interpreting its meaning. "I feel for you having to sit through it again."

Rodney did not say that this was his first visit, indeed he did not answer; and Vivian, inferring from this that some of the actors might be personal friends, sat quiet until the curtain fell. Then he jumped up, took down Stella's cloak, and preparing to put it round her, said, "Rodney, will you look after my mother?"

"Certainly." And after a little delay they all left the box together.

The piece was still under discussion; the four

joining in the conversation, they moved but slowly. That Stella was the magnate of attraction was shown by the way Rodney turned constantly to her. Vivian was delighted; nothing pleased him so much as to see her admired, especially by such a man as Maynard Rodney, and, under the plea of saying something to his mother, he stepped behind so that he might watch them better. He saw that other eyes and heads were turned in their direction, and no wonder, for Maynard Rodney was sufficiently good-looking to attract notice even from those who did not know of his fame; and Stella, in her artistic dress with a soft white feathery boa twined round her neck, was an ideal creation.

They had reached that angle of the exit where the audience from the various parts of the house meet, and the four were almost at the foot of the stairs down which were streaming the occupants of the upper boxes. Suddenly a burst of loud laughter made them look up. Immediately facing them, with their faces red and still grinning, stood Lottie and Carry, and between them a young sailor.

A shock ran through Stella which seemed to make her heart stand still and her whole body quiver; she saw that in that all but imperceptible glance each had become aware of the presence of the other. Across her ear like a flash went her name—"Stella."

What should she do? Pass on? Oh, that it had

been anywhere but here! any time but now! What if she seemed not to see — her head began to droop — if she — Never! There was a resurrection of her better nature, and in an instant her hands were stretched out and, because of that momentary temporizing, she exclaimed with greater fervour, “Edgar.” And the blushing young giant, not quite knowing what to say, made a step forward, passed his jacket-cuff across his mouth, and bestowed a very respectably-sounding kiss on her.

To the last hour of his life Vivian could never recall how the next five minutes passed, when every one around them was in a titter, and those outrageously-dressed, awful women were gabbling away to Stella and shaking hands with his mother. It was this that made him know who they must be. At the time his one idea was to rush forward and seek the footman to tell him to bring up the carriage immediately; and this done, he came back to find the family party bidding each other good-bye, his mother standing like a martyr, and Maynard Rodney pretending to be engrossed in studying the etchings on the walls. To imagine that of all men this should have happened before him. Merciful heaven! what must he think of them? Such an exhibition before the possessor of such a name.

Turning to Mrs. Stapleton, Stella laid a hand upon her arm.

"Forgive me for keeping you, dear Marraine," she said.

Rodney noted the little pressure given, and this assurance of sympathy between the two made him smile. Vivian happened to just catch the expression. To him it was as the match to the mine.

"I don't know if you are aware," he said, "that I sent Parsons some minutes ago to call up the carriage. It must be at the door blocking the way for everybody."

"We're quite ready, dear;" and Mrs. Stapleton turned to go, leaving Stella to follow.

Finding himself close to her, Vivian said, in his most sarcastic tone, "It's quite a relief not to find your eccentric friends waiting outside ready to favour us with another exhibition."

The words cut Stella like whip-cord, and called to arms all her pride. Looking at him defiantly, she said —

"My *eccentric friends* were my two sisters and my brother." She had forgotten Mr. Rodney, whom she now saw was holding out his hand to her, and thinking that perhaps a little explanation was necessary, she added to him, "Sailors are proverbially impulsive, and he is quite young — hardly more than a boy."

"A very lucky boy, and a very good-looking one too."

Her eyes spoke her thanks to him, involuntarily

his fingers tightened, and, surely, she returned the pressure.

"Then at eight o'clock on Tuesday next," Mrs. Stapleton was saying, "we are to have the pleasure."

"A thousand thanks! I shall be most happy."

And the carriage rolled away, leaving Maynard Rodney standing following it with his eyes until it turned the corner. Then he walked on.

CHAPTER XVI.

MAYNARD RODNEY'S way led him down to the Strand, into which the neighbouring theatres and various places of amusement were emptying themselves. Along that full artery of London life a motley crowd poured, all jostled together in strange contiguity—an imagery, so Rodney thought, of the ideas and fancies let loose in his own brain.

Enthralled for the time by a subtle new intoxication, his mind was not subject, as usual, to his control. He seemed powerless to carry on any train of thought without the intrusion of a thousand wild, imaginary, air-built fancies.

At one moment he was thinking of Stella, recalling that last look she had given him, vexed that he had not said that he too had a brother a sailor. "Oh, that snob of a fellow!" He was off now on Vivian Stapleton. "I guessed he was a conceited ass, now I know him for one. By Jove! what a look she gave him! Who would think those eyes could flash such fire?" and again he was back at the theatre, watching the tears gathering under the lids, smiling at the bound his heart had made when he recognized in her the ideal of his story, "Waiting."

How was it that about this point marriage came in? It did not seem to be led up to in any way, and yet he was arguing on the certainty of Stella and Vivian being engaged, and the probability of their being married almost immediately; and close on this came some very severe strictures on the fatuity of women in their choice of husbands, for who could not see how utterly unworthy Stapleton was of *her*? What was the attraction? Not money, for of that certainly she must have plenty; and away he went on Uncle Briggs—the fortune, the will. How had the old man left the money? Tied up, no doubt, with all his close-fistedness, so that she had no power to give help to her family, otherwise, he felt sure, they would not have been the same three he saw.

And at this point he laughed aloud, remembering how exactly he could have matched them from those in his own home. Then his face grew grave as he asked himself whether, under similar conditions, he would have shown the same amount of moral courage. He brought to mind how he had winced under certain phases of their merry moods and social pleasures, and he said reverently to himself—“She is a good, brave girl, that. I honour her.” Supposing events had gone differently, that Uncle Briggs had never been offended, and that he had been left the money, would *she* now be what her sisters were? With that face—? impossible! Still Rodney knew well, none better, what splendid embellishments to beauty are educa-

tion and refinement; and add to this the setting of elegant dress and grace of manner, and, as in Stella's case, nothing was left to desire.

An involuntary thrill ran through him as he connected these charms with the pleasure derived from a certain sense of ownership in them; a little feeling at bottom that had he not stood out in opposition to his uncle's wishes, she would still be in the humble class of life in which Fortune had found her, and he — the husband of Miss Selina Collins! Faugh! he could have hardly felt more disgust if that bone of contention had been before him.

"No, no," he said, after a short retrospect of his career. "Thank God, I escaped such a degradation. Positively I owe a debt of gratitude to that woman for bringing matters to a climax when she did. Who knows, I might have gone drifting on until I had sunk to that state when I could not have worked, and should have been ashamed to beg. Then the temptation might have given me no alternative." And the ignominy of such a state plunged him into a reverie which lasted some moments.

"Ah, well," he sighed, rousing himself, "I wish that without their knowing who I am I could tell her that she is welcome to every farthing. With all the calls made on me, it's true I could do with a little more, for I'm not a Midas as regards writing, all I touch by no means turns to gold. Still I manage to swim along without any big breaker going over me;

and so long as I have no one but myself to provide for I can get on. It must be precious close work though for some of the married ones. If I had a wife, now —”

Here something seemed to break in, and he became plunged into a second reverie, out from which he woke to say —

“Bah! authors ought never to marry. It is enough for them to be wedded to the creatures of their creation, and any love they may indulge in is best expended on the ideals of their stories.”

“You had an ideal in ‘Waiting,’” said one of those sly imps employed to tickle our fancy. “And the ideal has proved a reality,” answered another, with a more mischievous disposition.

Rodney drew himself together with an air of resolute assertion.

“I tell you what it is, young man,” arraiguing some inward being, “you’d better make the best of your way home before you become a greater fool than you are,” and he walked quickly on towards his chambers, a flat in Duke Street Mansions, Grosvenor Square. But even there he could not get rid of feminine influence, for having lit the lamp and thrown himself into an easy-chair, he looked round the room, a very pretty one, and continuing to rub the ears of his dog, who had come forward to welcome him, he said — “We might ask her here to tea, Rags, mightn’t we?”

"Boh, boh!"

"Oh, you want to know who I mean, do you? Rags, that is distinctly canine curiosity which I refuse to satisfy. Perhaps I don't want myself to know. Tell me, my dog, was it I, or was it some other wiseacre, who said, that when a man begins to think of a she as *her* he'd better consider there are but two remedies. Well, only one is given to me, and that I'm going to take. Nip it in the bud, Rags; pull it up while it's green, old girl."

In appreciation of being talked to, Rags wagged her tail.

"You agree with me? — that's right, then. Now we'll toddle off to bed, my dog, and leave resolution to drown folly."

While this little episode was being indulged in by Maynard Rodney, the rest of the party were bearing each other company home, under very unfavourable conditions. For fully five minutes after they had left the theatre not a word was spoken, then Mrs. Stapleton, in the hope that a little conversation might soothe their agitated tempers, said —

"Did you see Colonel Charteris, Vivian?"

"I? — no."

"Oh, I wonder at that; he was standing close to you."

"Very likely. I saw nothing I wanted to see."

"He turned round while we were waiting for the carriage and spoke to me."

"Exceedingly Quixotic in him."

"Quixotic! how? A man I've known since he was a boy."

"Exceedingly Quixotic — I repeat it. I should most certainly have been disposed to ignore my dearest friends, if those same friends were making themselves laughing-stocks in the eyes of everybody."

"Laughing-stocks?" repeated Mrs. Stapleton.
"Really, Vivian, I don't know what you mean."

"I mean that when persons by their extraordinary actions cause a mixed assembly to stand with a broad grin on their faces, the name they are best known by is laughing-stocks. If I am wrong I sit open to correction. This is an evening of enlightenments."

"Oh, you go too far," said the mother, feeling the subject had better not be pursued.

Her son, as she saw, was in his very worst mood, when his temper overcame every good quality, and each remark he made was meant to wound like a two-edged sword. Few could rival him in these flaying speeches, and the desire he felt to cause pain was like the thirst for blood — the appetite once whetted the savage nature knew no control.

This scene had taken place as they turned into Piccadilly, until they reached home not another word was spoken. Mrs. Stapleton promptly retired into the depths of her own corner, Stella by her side

sat pale and immovable, while Vivian kept his eyes fixed straight in front of him. At the door he would have liked to jump out of the carriage and walk straight into the house, but what is known as "the instincts of a gentleman" prevented him, and he stood with a sullen stare while he helped his mother and Stella to alight; then he followed them as far as the hall, but instead, as was his wont, of going up with them to the morning-room, where a tray of refreshments was laid, he ordered lights to be brought to his study, and went in there shutting the door after him.

Mrs. Stapleton remarked on the closeness of the night, and congratulated herself that they were not going to any ball; then seeing that Stella was refusing the wine that was offered to her, she said —

"No? — now, dear, you must take a little — if only a half-glass, to please me; you are looking pale, the heat no doubt. I think theatres very trying at this time of year — and a biscuit, do! Put them near Miss Stella, Clegg, and then we shall not require anything more. Say to Clements that I shall be up-stairs presently."

Clegg took his departure, and, hardly waiting until he had closed the door, Mrs. Stapleton in quite a different voice began —

"Oh, my dear child, what a world this is we live in! Can any one make sure of being happy for even one hour? Where, I ask you, when we left the house

this evening, could three people be found so fortunate, so united, so wrapped up in one another as you and I and Vivian—and now?” and she held her hands with the palms turned outwards in a gesticulation of inquiry.

“So far as we are concerned I can see no difference in us now to when we set out.”

Stella was speaking with that low distinct inflection of voice which tells of emotion and self-restraint. She was stung to the very quick by Vivian’s manner, and comparing it with the sympathy shown to her by a stranger, she asked if it was not possible that she felt ashamed of him—ashamed of that smallness in his nature which made him betray his petty pride, and vent his anger in wounding speeches to a woman.

“Well, as regards you and me,” said Mrs. Stapleton, “perhaps positively, no. Still, my dear Stella, you must admit that things have happened very unfortunately.”

“I am not so sure that I do admit that. Not now, Marraine, as things are.” This was in answer to the look with which Mrs. Stapleton was regarding her. “If Vivian had shown me the very smallest degree of kindness or generosity, I should have been most ready and willing to acknowledge what I at first felt, that I would rather we had met my brother and sisters somewhere else, and in some other way; but when he saw that I had recognized them, and they

me, what did he expect of me? That I should pass them by — pretend not to see them?"

"Well, dear, there are times when it really is best, in fact, the wisest policy to — a — keep our eyes shut. I'm sure you know that not any living creature could feel more for you than I do, still it is so painful to return from what ought to be an evening's enjoyment all at cross purposes like this, that it seems to me as if almost *anything* would be preferable."

"It would not be preferable for me to be humiliated in my own self-respect."

"Oh, come, come, dear, you must not take it in that way."

"But I must, and I do, and so do you too; and if I had given way to the temptation which did for a moment threaten me, you would now be feeling pity perhaps, but pity very akin to contempt for me. And right that you should, seeing how your good teaching would have been thrown away."

"Oh, my dear, you have never had any good teaching in that respect from me."

"I have had what is better — example, Marraïne dear," and Stella went over and knelt down by her guardian's side. "Until a week ago I never thoroughly appreciated you. Then when I went to see my family, I found that I had grown up to look at things with the eyes you had always seen them through — that a wide distance separated them from me, and the discovery gave me great pain."

"My poor child," said Mrs. Stapleton, looking at her.

"Ah, the poor child felt such gratitude to you, that you had never given even a hint of this to her, that you had allowed her to believe that there was only a difference of money between them and you."

Mrs. Stapleton shook her head.

"My dear, your mother is a far better woman than I am, or ever shall be."

"Dear mother," said Stella softly, "she saw at once the disappointment I had had. She told me that from the moment they had accepted the fortune for me, she knew what in time must happen. And she pleaded so pathetically for my sisters, begging me not to make a trouble of the difference between us, for that was inevitable; but to try when I saw them to remember that their natures were good, loving, generous, and that what jarred on me in their manners and appearance was the necessary result of their bringing up."

"It is true," said Mrs. Stapleton; "she is quite right."

"Well, then, after that if I could have passed by them, — have allowed her and them to feel that I was ashamed of them, — should I not be unworthy of her and of you?"

Mrs. Stapleton pressed the girl closely to her; then after a minute's silence she loosened her hold and held her so that she could look into her face.

“Stella,” she said, “your mother interceded with you for her other children, asking you to look over their defects in manner, because they were the faults of their bringing up. Listen now to another mother who pleads equally for her son. Never until recently did I see how faulty has been his training, and that much I desire to see altered in him now is due to his bringing up and to me. His heart is good, his nature generous. In the things that offend you — recollect this. Bear with him, Stella, be just to him, and you will show mercy to me.”

Stooping she kissed her, and leaving Stella to follow, she went out of the room.

CHAPTER XVII.

MOST of us know what it is to awaken with a sense of thunder being in the moral atmosphere, so that the most trivial word or action may at any moment bring about a storm. Morning is a great inspirer, and by its light much said and done on the previous night takes a different hue.

This feeling in varied degrees was being experienced by Vivian, Stella, and Mrs. Stapleton. The tumult into which they had been thrown had subsided, and in place of agitation there was that depressing flatness which imposes languor on the body as well as on the spirits.

Vivian, as was his habit when not quite certain that he had not been at fault, would have wished to act as if he had wiped out the whole circumstances from the tablets of his memory. He said to himself that he did not think such a thing would happen again ; he believed that Stella had received a lesson, and he wanted her to feel that if at the time he had seemed cruel, he had but acted for her good, and that now it was his desire to be kind.

Mrs. Stapleton was in favour of a not at all unfeminine fashion of setting quarrels straight. She

would have liked to throw her arms round the offended and the offender, to have seen them both fall into each other's embrace, after which they might have indulged in a good comfortable cry, and have ended by assuring each other that the sole and entire blame of the matter rested with the speaker.

It was only Stella who was pulling in pieces and sifting the whole circumstances, trying to find if she could take any, and how much, blame from Vivian to put upon her own shoulders. She reproached herself for having acted wrongly in not taking him to see her family, telling herself that when he had urged it, it was pride which had made her refuse. That feeling ought not to exist with the man you had accepted as a husband, even the wish to have a concealment from him amounted to treachery. Until she was prepared to remedy this error, she did not consider herself in a position to accuse. Her wisest plan, therefore, would be to go that very afternoon and see her mother, and find out from her on what day it would be convenient to receive Vivian; she would then ask him to accompany her, and the visit over, they would have a serious understanding.

Stella had been much touched by Mrs. Stapleton's appeal to her. She knew at what a cost the mother must have admitted that her idol had a fault, and she said to herself — "I will try and do all she asks of me, and be lenient and good to him. Even ordinary people are not without failings, and we are told that

clever persons, men and women of genius, should be judged in quite another way ;” and without exactly knowing why, her thoughts made a sudden leap to Maynard Rodney. Gradually the shadow of a smile passed over her face, and a little pink flush came as she recalled their parting — the words he had said, the pressure he had given to her hand. “I hope it wasn’t wrong to let him know I felt his sympathy ; he wouldn’t think it forward in me ? I am glad he is coming here to dine. I have taken quite a fancy to him, and he seemed to rather like to talk to me. Heigh-ho !” and not stopping to indulge in further retrospection, she rang the bell for her maid, telling her that as soon as she had dressed her, she wished a telegram taken.

Stella did not realize that this telegram was the first practical phase of the altered conditions in the relations between herself and her family. She felt that for the ease and comfort of all, it was best that she should announce to her mother her intention of going to see her, and a pre-paid reply asked at what hour the visit would be most convenient.

This done, she went down to see Mrs. Stapleton, who, she found, was going to have breakfast in her own sitting-room.

“ May I join you, Marraine ? ”

“ Do, dear, there are several things I want to talk over with you. I was just about to send you up an invitation.”

Vivian never made his appearance until a much later hour. It was one of his favourite sayings, that the English breakfast-table was among the survivals of national barbarism.

"I have had a letter from Mary Trevor," Mrs. Stapleton began, the sympathetic greeting between her and Stella over, "she gives me a tolerably strong hint that Delia finds the country very dull, and would like to be asked up here."

"And you'll ask her, won't you?"

"Well, I wondered would she be at all in the way—I mean with you and Vivian, dear?" she added, hesitatingly.

"Oh, no! how could she be?"

"Well," with a smothered down sigh, "she *could* be in many ways—the question is, *would* she be?"

"I don't think so. Certainly not with me, and Vivian used to like Delia, she is his favourite cousin, you know."

"Yes, she used to be; but then his tastes alter so completely."

"Not as regards those he really cares for."

Mrs. Stapleton stretched out her hand for Stella's, and pressed it warmly—

"Thank you, dear; it gives me such pleasure to hear you say a word in praise of him."

"In praise of him! But, Marraine, you know that I don't think there is any one half so talented or clever."

"No — only talents and cleverness command admiration, but not always love, Stella."

"You must allow though that they are great magnets of attraction."

Mrs. Stapleton's eyes were fixed on the girl wistfully, and Stella, thinking she knew the cause of her depression, leaned across towards her as she said —

"Dear, you have not yet recovered from last night's unfortunate misunderstanding. Now listen, I have a confession to make, which ought in a degree give you satisfaction. When I thought the matter over I saw that I certainly had not been without my share of blame. If I had kept firm to my original intention of taking Vivian to see my family he would have known my sisters, and that unlucky *contretemps* could not have occurred. It's true that he disappointed me by not going with me that first time, but when I returned he begged me to take him the next day, and that is what I ought to have done; but, to tell the truth, my pride prevented me, I felt a coward then, and said to myself, it would be time enough later, when everything was settled. Well, who knows, if I had not had this lesson, I might have let it drift on until Vivian was entitled to reproach me; for I have no right to force on him a relationship with persons whom he could not willingly accept."

"And now?" said Mrs. Stapleton tremulously.

"Well now, I am going to set it all right; I have

sent a telegram to my mother, telling her I am going to see her this morning or afternoon."

"And take Vivian with you?" asked Mrs. Stapleton anxiously.

"Well, no — hardly. I think I had best give them a little preparation; and then I have to learn what Vivian now would wish to do. You might ask, why not speak to him first? Well, no, I may not be able to make it quite clear why, but I have thought it all over, and I know what I mean."

Mrs. Stapleton gave a nod of her head and seemed to reflect. In reality she was reproaching providence, asking what need could there be for such a family to exist where there was a chance of coming in contact with them? Surely the world was big enough — Australia, America, the Colonies. She was willing to give them the choice of any of these places, so long as they would not insist in living on in London. Even the country, though still in England, would be something gained. Might not removal there be made a condition of the income which Stella was soon to settle on them? Mrs. Stapleton stole a rapid glance at the fair face opposite to her, and at once a thousand difficulties shadowed the proposal. Her close companionship with Stella daily taught her that to suggest anything mean, base, dishonourable to that upright, candid nature was like flinging soil upon fresh-fallen snow. There are those who have the power to touch whatever is good in us, and Mrs.

Stapleton knew that, quite unconsciously, Stella exercised that power over her.

"I was thinking," she began, "that if —" but here a knock at the door interrupted her, and a voice was heard asking, "May I come in?"

The door was opened by Vivian, who, a close observer would have seen, was smiling rather more than was usual with him.

"Good-morning," said his mother, hurriedly. "This is an early visit to have from you."

"Yes," advancing into the room; "but I had to get up earlier, and coming down I happened to hear that a certain little bird had left her nest and had flown, so I thought I should find her here; and —" putting his hand on either side of Stella's head, he touched with his lips her hair — "I have done so."

Mrs. Stapleton breathed more freely. Already he had also lightly touched her cheek, and had moved over to where he was able to look at Stella. She, desirous of seeming quick to accept the apology which both felt had been offered to her, said —

"Now you will be able to give the casting vote to a question under discussion. Aunt Trevor" — Stella had been taught to adopt all Vivian's relations — "has written to say that Delia finds the country dull, and Marraine was wondering if she should ask her to come up and stay here."

"But certainly — you would like it?"

"I should."

"Then, mother, pray ask her; it is ages since I saw anything of Delia."

While he was speaking a servant had brought in a telegram. Vivian stretched out his hand to take it.

"It is for Miss Stella, sir."

"Oh, I beg your pardon," handing it to her. "I was expecting one, so I took it for granted it was for me."

"It is, I know, from my mother," she answered, opening it, and letting her eyes take in the words before her, hesitating all the time whether she should not brave all and ask him to accompany her. Raising her head she said slowly, "She wishes me to go and see her this afternoon."

"This afternoon," he repeated, carelessly. "Ah, I have a man coming to see me who is going to India. I expect he comes in the hope that I shall be induced to go with him, but he will hear that it is possible, that events over which I have no control, may prevent me."

"Nay!" said the mother, "you mean *will*."

"Do I? but perhaps you will allow me to spell it *m a y*."

And feeling that his temper was not yet under very good control, he got up and sauntered out of the room.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SEVERAL things occurred that afternoon to impress the visit to Matilda Grove upon Stella's memory. In the first place, the family, dressed in their best bibs and tuckers, were not only prepared to receive her, but wished her to see that the amenities of social life were not beyond their power. Spread round at equal distances on the parlour table were books in gawdy blue and red cloth bindings — gifts from the two girls' lovers. Crochet or wool work antimacassars covered the backs of the chairs. A large rug with impossible lilies and roses hid certain defects of the carpet, and a bead cushion in the crudest colours served to throw up the ravages time had made in the old sofa. The room in its natural state of dull shabbiness wore the look of an old friend to Stella : now, like its occupants, its finery gave her a shiver.

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Clarkson, when Stella was seated among them, the greetings over, and it had been settled that she meant to stay and have tea with her father. "Now you must tell us which of the two was the beau, the girls came home dying to find out the one who was to be their brother-in-law."

"Oh, I can pretty well guess," said Carry, whose former shyness had flown before the assurance of having her best dress on. "The tall one with the brown hair; he looked at us so, the other one ran off like a lamp-lighter."

"And no wonder," and Mrs. Clarkson laughed heartily. "To think of that boy going up and kissing you before everybody. The girls did chaff him nicely. But wasn't it like a sailor? and he's that all over, bless him, dear fellow."

"I don't believe he knew what else to do," said Carry, "he was so struck of a heap when Lottie said, That's Stella. You did look beautiful though. I say — I only wish mother could ha' seen you."

"I wish I could," responded the mother. "The both of them said you looked heavenly, they didn't wonder at your young man showing himself so proud of you."

"I am not aware that he did," said Stella.

"Oh, come now," and Carry gave a knowing grin at her, "it's no use trying that on with me. 'Twas him that first caught my eye, the way he was bending his head down, so — over you," and the ludicrous imitation set Stella laughing.

Mrs. Clarkson joined out of real light-heartedness. Stella's presence — when all was properly prepared for her — was like sunshine.

"And to think that me and father will once more have you all sitting round the table with us again,"

she said, as if in explanation of her merriment. "Ah, my dears, God has been very good to us."

"Well, and so have you too," said Carry bluntly.

"What could anybody have done more than you and the old dad has done for us all, eh, Stella? Why they'd work themselves to death for us now if we'd let 'em; and why? we want to know, we're young and strong."

Stella looked kindly at her sister.

"Oh, I hope that an end will be put to all that soon. I am of age when I am nineteen, and before if I marry."

"Ah! and what about that?" said Mrs. Clarkson, "is anything further settled as to date?"

"Not yet — well, there hardly could be." Stella thought this was her opportunity. "Mr. Stapleton has not spoken to father yet, and he hasn't seen any of you, and that is why I want to know when I may bring him here."

A dubious "Oh!" came from her mother; while Carry, with a puzzled air, asked —

"What should he want to speak to father about?"

"About me," said Stella. "Why, when the young man you are engaged to wanted you, he asked father's consent, didn't he?"

"No, I'm bothered if he did. My Yes was enough for him, and so let yours be, eh, mother?"

"You see, my dear," said Mrs. Clarkson, apologetically, "father ain't quite what he used to be; his

years begin to tell upon him more than I like to see, because he's far from being an old man, dear fellow; but still little things do fidget him, don't they, Carry?"

"Well, more than they used to they do. Anything like being set down face to face with a tip-top swell like Mr. Stapleton would upset the dear old man's apple-cart completely."

"Yes, Stella, I really am afraid so," said Mrs. Clarkson.

Stella sat dismayed. What should she do? To tell them that what she really wanted was that Vivian should see *them* was impossible. In the hope of giving further conviction, Mrs. Clarkson added —

"If Mr. Stapleton was a stranger, now, that would be a different matter; but knowing the family as we do, to ask father's consent is paying them a very poor compliment, so it seems to me, and I hardly know what father would find to say."

"Not that he thought he was good enough for you," laughed Carry; "they wouldn't neither o' them say that if 'twas the Prince o' Wales."

"Come, come, now," retorted the mother. "You two girls ain't far behind; there isn't another living being with them like 'my sister.' It doesn't matter if it's in the theatre, or pictures, or fashion-plates, nobody can touch Stella."

Carry roared with laughter at this accusation.

"Anyhow," she said, "we're going to make a reg-

ular exhibition of you to-night, Stella. My young man's coming in to tea, — I've promised he shall have an eyeful of you, — and Ned Phillips. You recollect the Phillipses? They kept a picture-frame shop in the Fulham Road. We all went to school together."

"Not Stella didn't, my dear."

"Oh, I s'pose she was too young. Anyhow me and Lottie did, and Ned's been sneaking after Lottie ever since. They never get so far as settling it quite. Somtimes it's on and sometimes it's off; just now it happens to be on, and so, as he wants to have a look at you, he's going to drop in."

"I hope Edgar will be at home," said Stella, hardly knowing what was expected of her.

"Oh, trust him, dear fellow," said Mrs. Clarkson. "You ain't to know the reason of his being out now, but the truth is, he's gone to buy a cage for the parrot he's brought home for you."

"A parrot! Where is it?"

"Why out with him," said Carry, "or you'd soon enough know."

"And does it talk?"

"Oh, it will splendidly."

Carry made a grimace of dissent — "H'mm!"

"Now, Carry, be quiet. It's like this, my dear," and Mrs. Clarkson turned to Stella, "the bird's picked up two or three words on the voyage home. Edgar says they always do — that parrots are so quick at what you don't want them to learn; but at home

with you, where he won't hear any language of the kind, he'll soon forget it all, and say whatever you like to teach him."

"But I wish he hadn't gone to get a cage; I must pay for it, though."

"No, no; that 'ud hurt his feelings dreadfully. He's been saving up for that; he showed me he'd got the money."

"Oh, and he's quite the young man there," said Carry; "he knows how to stand treat for the ladies. And now I think I'll leave you two together. I heard Lottie come in, and while she gets on her dress I'll look after the tea. We're going to have it down-stairs, Stella; do you mind? The table here's so small."

Left alone with her mother, Stella hoped that she might so far gain a concession to her wishes that Mrs. Clarkson would consent to see Vivian; but, although she did not positively refuse, finding it was her daughter's wish, she begged for delay, saying it would be time enough when Stella brought him as her husband.

"You see, my dear, we've not been accustomed to people in his rank of life," she finally urged, "and I'm certain it would only prove a trial to him, and to us, and to you."

"But, dear mother, you speak of Mr. Stapleton as if he was some very grand person — an earl or a duke

—but he is nothing of the sort. His father was a man of very good family, but Marraine's relations — the Trevors — are all brewers."

"My dear, I only know they were the only people that Uncle Briggs stood cap in hand before. He thought that a bit of the world had been railed off for the Trevors, and perhaps it's for that reason that I think of them as I do. I remember, the very last time I was in his house, he'd been to dinner with Mrs. Stapleton, and, la! how he did blow the trumpet about it all. In the middle of it, the little fellow who was to have had the money let his knife and fork fall, and oh dear! how those two — aunt as well as uncle — did go on with him."

"Oh, mother, what was his name? I've often intended to ask."

"Yes, my dear, it's fitting you should know, for he suffered a great disappointment through you, and a great injustice too. I've often tried to recollect his right name — Briggs was the one he went by."

"Then I dare say he is Briggs still. Was he a nice boy?"

"I can hardly remember. I fancy he was plain-looking, rather beetle-browed, with a kind of hang-dog manner, which wasn't to be wondered at when you saw how they nagged at him. Father knows more about him as a lad than I do."

"I must speak to father about him."

And the subject begun, Stella continued talking until her father's arrival. But then no opportunity of questioning him was given to her. No sooner was his key heard in the door than Lottie was there to pounce on him and bear him off to change his clothes, so that he might be as smart as the others were. By the time this operation was over, and he had been made to don a new stock of bright blue satin, which the girls had bought so that he might wear Stella's pin, poor James Clarkson was about as uncomfortable as clothes could make him. Always a silent man, he seemed unable to find a word to say to his daughter, except to pay her what to him was the greatest compliment he knew of, that she reminded him of what her mother used to be. Finally, Edgar and the two admirers having arrived, Stella was conducted down-stairs to join them at tea.

Poor Stella! for weeks after her visit how she longed to blot out that evening from her memory. The young men, who both persisted in calling her miss, were of a type she had never met before. In reality they were intelligent, average young fellows, but this was an occasion when, like herself, they felt as "fishes out of water." At first they hardly ventured on more than "yes" and "no," a state of sheepishness which the irrepressible Carry sought to correct by roughing up, in passing, the very curly hair of one swain, and dropping a hot spoon on the hand of another. These pleasantries seemed to act

as the "open sesame" to greater sociability. Gradually they drifted into more easy manners and familiar conversation, in which father, mother, and all were interested, and at times joined; while Stella, forced to sit silent and to seem to smile, felt herself drifting away from every one who belonged to her.

Ask Vivian to accept relations such as these! Impossible! A day with them would drive him mad. She was in sympathy with what he would feel. These terrible connections seemed, as much as they could, to even vulgarize her father and mother; never before had she felt so completely out of touch with them. And the stronger this impression became, so much the deeper it wounded her, until every sensation seemed swallowed up in the desire to get away.

Even their tender farewells failed to salve her seared feelings. She was tempted to refuse Edgar's escort home; but the lad looked so radiant as he appeared with the parrot in its cage in one hand, and a bunch of impossible flowers made of shells in the other, that Stella swallowed down her remonstrances, and together away they went. The drive was rather a silent one, but that did not distress Edgar, who, like his father, was not of a talkative disposition. How the parrot was to be fed, whether it might be trusted, and what it could say, afforded sufficient conversation. The house reached, he was

quite overawed by the imposing appearance of a liveried footman, and after an embarrassed good-bye he made a hasty retreat.

The door had barely closed on him when out of his study, at the far end of the hall, Vivian appeared.

"I'm so glad to see you back," he said, coming towards Stella. "I was just thinking of going to fetch you ; I began to get fidgety when I heard no carriage was to be sent."

"My brother came home with me."

"That's all right, so long as somebody had safe charge of you." And then stooping so that he could see her better, he said with concern — "You're tired, I'm afraid, the poor little face looks pale," and he put his hand under her chin and tilted it upwards.

"I think I am tired," she answered, looking at him wistfully ; "and oh, Vivian, there is something I want to say to you."

Her heart beat so quickly that he could but notice her agitation.

"Something to say to me," he repeated. "Yes ; then let us come in here."

And he led her into the room he had just left — one of those sanctuaries of taste where each art finds its appropriate shrine. The sense of contrast to all she had left ran through Stella with a shiver.

"My child, you are not well," Vivian began

anxiously. "Now don't distress yourself with talking; I think I know what it is you want to speak about. Mother has told me that last night I made you very unhappy. Well, I partly realized that, and I tried to show you that I did this morning. You know what a queer, uncontrollable nature mine is, especially when things go wrong with my tastes in any way. Well, last night you were looking your very best, and I was actually revelling in the admiration you were attracting, when — we won't recall it, but even you, dear, will allow that with such a sudden douche of cold water there was perhaps a little excuse for me."

She gave a nod of assent.

"But it isn't only that," she said earnestly; "it is that I did not until now see how wide the social difference is between us."

"Between us and them? No, no, I refuse to contemplate them in any way if you separate yourself from me. My dear Stella, I know what you mean and how you feel, and I have been told what your good, sensible mother said to you; and all I ask is that you should accept happiness as she tells you to, and trust to me to be one with you in securing the ease and well-being of all those who belong to you. And now not a word more. I've a heap of things to say, and I'm running down to Towerbridge to-morrow to have a business talk with Uncle Harold. I shall return on Tuesday and bring Delia with me, and

unless a certain somebody consents to behave very prettily, and bring back some of the roses here,"— and he pinched her cheek tenderly,— "my friend, Mr. Maynard Rodney, will have the honour of taking in to dinner Miss Cordelia Trevor."

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CHAPTER XIX.

TUESDAY had come. Dinner was served, and as Vivian let his eyes go round the table, seldom had he felt more complete satisfaction than with the guests he saw seated there.

One of their county magnates had been secured for his mother, a much-talked-of artist for Delia, a very celebrated Frenchwoman for himself, and Maynard Rodney for Stella.

These last two were very well pleased at finding themselves told off for one another, and they chatted together gaily, and joined in the general conversation, until a moment came when all the rest were engrossed in a fresh discussion ; then Rodney, dropping his voice almost to a whisper, said —

“How is the parrot?”

“Parrot! My parrot, do you mean? Oh, but how did you know I had one? You’ve not heard him I hope—have you?”

“No, that pleasure is to come, as yet I have only seen him.”

Stella looked at him with surprise.

“But how—where have you seen him?”

“Now shall I keep this secret a dark mystery or shall I tell you?”

"Tell me, please — do."

He looked at her appealing face, and then said —

"Well, on Friday evening, being impelled by the force of circumstances to take a walk down this road, I saw a cab pass me which presently stopped, and out stepped a handsome young sailor, who handed out a parrot, a lady, and a magnificent bunch of wonderful flowers which, before taking his leave, he presented to her."

"That is to me — I was that lady. How funny now that you should happen to be passing there at that very moment. I wonder though that I did not see you."

"You were far too occupied ;" he did not say that he had drawn back purposely to escape recognition. "You hadn't a twentieth part of the glance of an eye to spare for me."

"The young sailor was my brother — the same one," with a little hesitation, "that you saw at the theatre. He brought the parrot home from abroad for me."

"I hope you appreciate the attention ?"

"I do ; for it must have been a terrible trouble, and it was very kind of him to think of me, only —"

"Ah ! I was waiting for that 'only.'"

"Why ?"

"I'll tell you my 'why' later ; let me hear your 'why' now."

"Well," she said, "the truth is, the bird is so

naughty; the things he says — dreadful! I couldn't repeat them. As long as I stand speaking to him he sings and whistles, and is quite good, but the instant I turn to go — oh dear! worse than shocking; and the odd thing is, I do believe it is because he has taken a fancy to me."

"In that case we must all begin to swear most horribly. I shall make my expressions blood-curdling."

She gave a little rippling laugh.

"Only take care not to be worse behaved than Polly — remember, he does not begin until I turn my back on him.

"Seriously though," she went on, looking as if this question was really with her an important one, "I do not know what I shall do with him. They tell me if I talk to him, and have him constantly in the room with me, that he will soon forget all he has picked up on board ship; but to have him in any of the rooms we sit in is impossible. Viv — Mr. Stapleton wouldn't endure the sight of a parrot; he says birds in cages are so inartistic."

"Really! I don't know that they ever struck me in that light." Rodney's tone was slightly withering.

"I dare say though the poor things themselves wish that every one thought so."

"Yes, I can fancy it would be a popular idea in the feathered animal kingdom; but, however prejudiced he may be, he would surely give way in this

case. If you cared for the bird he would be obliged to—to make a pet of it.”

“No, I fear not; the very sight of it would be sure to irritate him. Marraine—that is, Mrs. Stapleton, I mean—suggested, if we could think of nothing better, sending it to the Zoo, because they would be certain to take care of it there.”

“Oh, but you mustn’t do that.”

“It would be a pity, wouldn’t it? and because of Edgar it would grieve me. Of course I should try that he didn’t know, but I should always feel the treachery to the poor boy. He has very little pay, but he saved enough money to buy the bird and to buy a cage for it for me; and then—to send it away as if it was of no value to me. . . .”

As she spoke the tender eyes looked as if they had tears behind them, and a little tremor in the voice went straight to the listener’s heart.

“Let me have it,” he said, “to keep for a time for you. I will return it a model bird, saying nothing that isn’t ‘prunes and prisms’; you have no idea how clever I am with parrots.”

“Not really?”

“Yes, really; we each have our talent, you know.”

“Now you are fishing for flattery. I have read nearly all your books.”

“You have? How I should like to know what you think of them. Don’t tell me that you were delighted—that you never read any books you liked

so much before. Those are the stock phrases kept to give to authors."

Here a necessity arose for them to join in the general conversation ; they continued talking for some time, and then having drifted back again, Stella said —

"I am obliged to tell you that I did enjoy reading your books immensely ; the only thing I wished was that they hadn't been quite so sad."

"But life is sad, is it not?"

"Yes ; to many I fear very sad."

"But not to you ? You are quite happy ?"

"I don't know. Can we any of us say we are quite happy, that there is nothing about us that we would have changed?"

"If *you* cannot answer that question how can I ? I expected to hear you say that, like the princess in a fairy tale, you were happy as the day is long. Young, beautiful, rich, everybody loving you, and, according to those who mind other people's business more than their own, one, not very far from us, wishing to devote himself entirely to you."

"But suppose that with all that you felt there was something — you didn't know what — that prevented you from positively saying you were quite happy ? What could that be?"

"Ah, what indeed?"

"But you, more than most people, ought to know, because in your books you put into words what many

can only feel. If it was the case of one of your heroines now, how would you treat it — what would you say of her?"

"Possibly that it was heart-hunger — a complaint very common to us all — an unsatisfied want that many have, and yet are ignorant of having."

"Heart-hunger," she said softly. "I shall remember that and think it over. I have enjoyed this talking with you, it is like your books, they set one thinking."

"Don't turn my head too completely."

"That is not possible, you are so used to having praise from everybody."

"And yet a word from one person will sometimes make us more vain than the flattery of everybody."

Stella looked up. Had their eyes met? Possibly, for they both turned hastily away and neither spoke to the other. Why should she feel this conscious little tumult of feeling, which was not agitation or vexation, or indeed like anything she had ever felt before? She tried to recover herself by endeavouring to plunge into the conversation around her, but before she had grasped the subject she heard "Stella," and she saw that the ladies were rising.

"I can quite understand your being engrossed, dear," said Mrs. Stapleton, kindly.

"Yes, you two have been talking to each other very earnestly," and Vivian smiled good-humouredly. "You have quite monopolized Mr. Rodney, Stella."

"Miss Clarkson and I discovered we had a taste in common," said Rodney.

"A great many, I should say, but what was the particular one in question?"

"I am devoted to parrots."

"To parrots!" exclaimed Vivian in horror, while the other men roared with laughter. "Well, then, cure yourself, I beg of you, by asking to be shown a specimen we have had brought here. If he's not 'a devil, and an ostrich, and an orphan child in one,' I don't know where you'll find him. His ear-splitting voice pursued me the entire way down-stairs yelling, 'I'm off on the spree, I'm off on the spree.'"

"Come along, Stella," said Delia, "let us go up-stairs and see if he has gone."

"I sincerely hope not," said Rodney, venturing a look at Stella as the girls stood aside to let the elder women pass out of the room. "I have asked that I may be entrusted with his education. I am quite looking forward to the improvement I shall effect in his moral tone. Shall I take him away to-night with me, Miss Clarkson?"

"My dear fellow, you've gone clean stark staring mad," said Vivian as they returned to the table.

"Have I? I shouldn't wonder. I suppose we all of us go mad some time or other."

"Perhaps; but hardly on parrots."

"Oh, possibly the parrot is the symbol, not the object."

CHAPTER XX.

WHEN the gentlemen joined the ladies in the drawing-room, Vivian took his seat by the chair of Madame Simon ; Sir Charles Donnithorne and the young artist continued a conversation which they had already begun ; Stella and Delia were standing together on the balcony ; Mrs. Stapleton, looking at Maynard Rodney, made a sign that there was a place vacant next her.

"I have hardly had a word with you," she said, "and I wanted so much to tell you how greatly Stella and I enjoy your books. She has been reading some of them to me."

"You make me very happy by telling me so."

"Ah, but how happy you must be to feel what pleasure you give, that is indeed worth working for ; and my son tells me that you work very hard."

"I am obliged to — necessity is a great spur."

"Be very thankful for the necessity ; depend on it, those are happiest who have to work."

"I know that theory is usually held by those who can afford to be idle."

"Because experience has taught them to speak with authority. Take, for example, my own son,

I am convinced that if he had been forced to earn his living he would have made a great name by now."

"Would that have made him more happy?"

"Most certainly, because, as he says, he feels the divine afflatus within him is as the talent that was kept wrapped in the napkin. Oh, when he hears of the success of men who have not a quarter of his ability, I can see how bitterly it galls him. You know he has the most utter contempt for money."

"Perhaps because he has never known the want of it. I fear it is in human nature to set most store upon that we do not possess."

"Ah, now you are giving me a glimpse of that cloven foot of pessimism which is the one thing I cannot agree with in your books."

"Oh, my small remark will not carry such a big word as that. If you could see into the bottom of my heart I believe you would find it had its root in envy—a jaundiced eye caused by looking at a home of refinement and luxury, with plenty of leisure to indulge individual tastes and inclinations, and, above all to me, surrounded by an atmosphere of love and affection."

She gave a little inclination of her head as she said smilingly—

"You draw a charming picture."

"It was meant as the background of a portrait."

"Oh yes, in the situation I recognize my son. It

is true ; he has every good thing in life to make him a happy man. Since he was *so* high he has been my sole care. His father died when he was a child, and from that time in my heart Vivian has had no rival."

"No?" Involuntarily Rodney's eyes seemed to stray towards the balcony.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Stapleton, "you mean Stella. Your quick grasp of things makes you see how dear she is to me."

"I can quite fancy it would not be a difficult task to grow fond of her."

"No indeed, she has the very sweetest nature in the world, full of goodness and sympathy, and such a tender heart. I had to threaten to hide your last story away, she was so distressed over it."

"Does she like romantic stories?"

"I suppose she does, although I often tell her that there really is no romance in her."

"In what way?"

"Well, as regards love now. But there, I don't know that she is singular in that, all you young people are very much the same — so prosaic, so matter-of-fact in all you say or do. If it is a question of engagement — oh, yes, we're engaged, we intend to marry each other some day ; but all those little tender preliminaries, which, take the word of an old woman, are not only sweet at the time, but sweet to look back upon, are out of date, old-fashioned. If I

but chance to mention them, Vivian, and Stella too, laugh at me."

Rodney was quite aware that there could be no reason for such a thrill of pleasure to run through him, yet "his bosom's lord," hitherto heavy within him, leaped up to "sit more lightly on its throne." Down-stairs, after Stella had left the table, as well as here, he had told himself twenty times over that he would not come to the house again, and even this time, while in it, he would avoid having any conversation with her in which others did not join. He was very unflinching in this decision, but it happened at this moment that Vivian proposed showing some costume engravings to Madame Simon.

"Shall we not descend and look at them in your charming study?" she said; and as they rose to go down, Mrs. Stapleton asked Sir Charles if he had ever seen the room.

"Never."

"Then let us all go."

Maynard Rodney's mentor told him to follow, but inclination, usually a temporizer, suggested that as this was the last opportunity, and he was so firmly resolved not to put himself again in the way of danger, could he not afford to treat resolution? and that he had listened to the voice of the charmer was shown by his saying —

"Then I will bring Miss Clarkson?"

"Do," said Mrs. Stapleton ; "she complains of feeling the heat this evening. It is that which makes her sit out on the balcony, although I am far from sure that it is quite wise."

Rodney went across the drawing-room to where an angle brought Stella into view. She was standing with her elbows leaning on the cushioned cope of the balustrade, her hands supporting her chin. Suddenly, with the instinct that some one was drawing near, she turned her head ; he quickly joined her.

"Why were you standing there ?" she said.

"I was looking at *you*," — he was doing that still — "not seeing you as you are here, but as I first saw you."

"Saw me — where ?"

"The name of the place I cannot tell you. I had been paying a visit to an old friend, and I was walking to the station ; I did not care for the road, so at venture I pushed my way down through a thicket of trees to a path I had seen below, and the last bit of scramble brought me close to an old bridge, over which was leaning — much as you are leaning now — a young girl."

"Oh, I know," she said, in a voice of glad surprise — "Peuffaire. I remember you now distinctly, I can see you exactly as you stood ; the noise of the bushes had startled me, I looked round, and you took off your hat to me."

"And you bowed."

"And then you went on."

"Yes, but I looked back, and saw you still standing there, and I carried your image along with me all the way, weaving as I went a little story."

"Did you give it a name?"

"Yes, 'Waiting.'"

"Waiting! but that is the story that is just out. I read it yesterday. It made me cry so, that Mairaine threatened to hide the magazine away."

"What made you cry?"

"The girl — it was so sad waiting for the love that never came."

"And the man seeking but not able to find her."

"But they neither of them knew."

"And is not that often the case? The heart craves for some one we have never seen. It lies within us dead, only to be quickened by that affinity which it is said we each possess."

"I wonder," she murmured, "how would one know whether one had met that affinity?"

"I should know," he said.

"Something would tell you?"

"Yes, there must be pains and pleasures at the birth of love that can never be felt at any other time."

They were silent for a few minutes, until Stella said —

"You make me feel as if love was something very sacred — almost solemn."

"I think it is — that is why we should guard so strictly against any mistake in its bestowal. Unless we are sure, beyond doubt, that he or she who asks for our heart is that heart's elected one, we commit an injury on another and an outrage on ourselves." Then fearing he had been led to say more than was expedient, he added in an altered tone — "But we have drifted into a very sentimental conversation. A bachelor laying down the law about love is like an old maid forcing her advice on a mother as to the way she should bring up her children."

"But you are not going to be a bachelor for ever?"

"I think so, unless, like Benedick, I live to be a married man, which is not likely, for wives are a very expensive luxury."

"Not necessarily."

"I don't know. Think of the hats and bonnets and all the pretty gowns you wear; I should want to see my wife dressed prettily, and the masculine of toilette is toil."

"But if it were the affinity," she said, giving him a little smile, "you would not mind toiling for her?"

"Not if she would be satisfied with what the bended nib of one poor pen could give her."

"One does not need to be rich to be happy."

"No; still there are certain things which, if you have become used to, it is very hard to forego."

"I dare say; and yet I have never felt as if I should be afraid or ashamed of actual poverty."

"It must be very difficult for any one to realize, born and bred as you have been in luxury."

"But I was not born and bred in luxury," she said simply. And Rodney felt the hot blood rush to his face, as if he blushed at the trap he had laid for her. "My family are not at all in the same rank of life that apparently I am. I thought you would guess that by having seen them at the theatre."

He did not answer, and she went on to say —

"There is really a touch of romance in my little history — it would not make at all a bad story. Shall I give it to you as the plot for a novel?"

"But you have not more than reached the first volume."

"Well, you would not have me finish myself off so that you might end the story. I will start you, and then you must exert your imagination."

"I am all curiosity, please begin."

"Well then, once upon a time — That is the proper way, is it not?"

"Quite the proper way — strictly classical."

"— there was a little girl — But stay, perhaps I had better begin with the young man."

"Oh, a young man is there?" in a rather disappointed tone.

"But he's a very important character. Poor fellow! he ought to have had all the money which the rich uncle left to the little girl."

"Ah, yes, that's what these sort of poor young men always say."

"But I don't know that *he* does say so; it is I who say it. I have never seen him, I do not even know his real name; but I mean to find it out, and all about him, as soon as I come of age, and have the power to make him some substantial compensation for the hardship I have caused him."

"I shouldn't trouble — dead very probably by this time."

"How very unjust you are to him."

"He doesn't interest me; I want to hear all about the little girl."

"But I meant to make him the hero of the story."

"How the hero?"

"Well, we must have a romance of some sort. As you say, there are three volumes to be got through, so I thought the thing would be to make the little girl —"

"But you have told me nothing about her yet."

"Now that comes of putting me out just as I was beginning. The little girl and the poor young man had the same rich uncle."

"What, between them?"

"Yes; only he had promised all his money to the young man, when suddenly, because he offended him, he made a fresh will, and gave it instead to the little girl, and then he died almost immediately, and the poor young man was left without a penny; and the

little girl — because the will said so — was taken from her father and mother, to be brought up by those who would see that she was trained and educated properly. Now doesn't that make a very good beginning for a story — quite enough I should say to fill one volume?"

"Quite; but there are to be three, so you will have to tell me more."

"That will be making up the whole story for you."

"Why not let it be a joint production; we will collaborate together; only the little girl must be given to me — I wash my hands of that young man."

"Very well; but remember, I intend him to be the hero of the story. I shall introduce them to each other in the beginning of the second volume."

"When she offers him the compensation?"

"Oh, nothing half so prosaic: he will either save her when a boat upsets, or stop the horses of the carriage when they are running away — at all events he will fall desperately in love with her; so now consider, what will you make her do?"

"She will have disposed of her heart before they meet."

"Then with you will lie the very delicate task of making her get her heart back again. I will so far give in to you that they may go on misunderstanding each other until the middle of the third volume, but I will not give my consent to a bad ending."

"Then I must resign the ending into your hands, with me the final act is always tragedy."

"But I want them to be happy. Oh! and they must be too. Of course just now I cannot quite see how it will come about, but in some way, when he is in the very depths of despair, I shall make him discover that as he has loved her, so she all the time has loved him — that each is the other's affinity."

A deep-drawn sigh escaped from Rodney.

"Ah! it does not please you?" she said.

"On the contrary; the Utopian fate of that young man fills me with supreme envy."

"Now you are laughing at me."

"Laughing at you!"

He stopped, and Stella raising her eyes to his let them fall before the look he had turned on her. An instant passed, perhaps more, for in those troubled moments the count of time seems lost — neither spoke or moved. Then a sound of voices broke the spell. Stella felt her hand, which rested on the balustrade, pressed as if in parting.

"No, I wish I *could* laugh."

And already he had turned away, and was walking towards Mrs. Stapleton, who said,

"You couldn't induce her to come?"

"Impossible; but I was just about to seek you, as unfortunately another engagement is carrying me away."

"I am sorry. I wanted to renew the pleasant talk

we were having together." Then stepping through the open doors to the landing she called, "Vivian, Mr. Rodney is obliged to leave us."

"Oh, please don't trouble, I shall find him in the hall."

"Yes, they are sitting there discussing some of the pottery."

Rodney made his adieux, and then went down and repeated the same to Vivian.

Differing from most London houses, the hall was large enough to be furnished, and comfortable settees enabled you to admire the wealth of artistic treasures. A short narrower passage separated it from the street door, which a curtain — to be drawn at will — altogether hid from view. Rodney was just about to pass through this curtained aperture, when a voice said,

"Sneaking away without the parrot, I perceive."

It was Delia Trevor. Rodney turned and looked at her, not at once grasping what was meant.

"Oh, I'm not at all surprised," she added, laughingly. "I felt sure you would, and I win a pair of gloves. Stella was so certain that Mr. Rodney meant all he said."

"She was quite right — I do."

"When you say it, perhaps."

"That is cruel."

"Who is cruel?" said Mrs. Stapleton from above. She was leaning over the banister; Sir Charles had

just left her to talk to Stella. "What is that saucy girl saying, Mr. Rodney?"

"Mr. Rodney is so disappointed that he is not taking Stella's parrot away with him, aunty."

"Oh, but do you really mean that offer to be taken seriously, Mr. Rodney?"

"Certainly I do; the question is, how am I to get possession? I fear you would think it was conferring too great an honour on me to propose your coming to tea."

"But we should enjoy it immensely."

"Would Wednesday at five o'clock suit you?"

"Perfectly. On Wednesday then — Delia, Stella, the parrot and myself. You see I am going to inflict the whole party on you."

"A thousand thanks, you make me most happy."

Yet a few minutes later, the door having closed on him, he said between his teeth —

"Fool that I am — fool — fool."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE guests gone, Vivian remained down-stairs to put away the engravings he had been showing to Madame Simon.

Stella the while was thinking how it would be possible to slip off to her own room without waiting to bid him good-night. She was troubled by a feeling that in some undefined way she had been disloyal to him. She wanted to think things over, and she felt that to sit down and discuss the events of the evening, and hear and repeat what this one and the other had said, was more than she could endure.

"Marraine," she said, affecting to suppress a yawn, "do you know I think I must say good-night."

"Are you tired, darling?"

"I don't know that I am tired, but I am sleepy."

Mrs. Stapleton looked at her a little anxiously.

"I wondered if you had felt quite yourself this evening. I did not like to interfere with your remaining out on the balcony, but I am not sure, with a thin evening dress, that it is quite wise."

"I'm all right, dear, indeed. It's only that I want to go to by-bye."

"Vivian will be up presently."

"Where is he? putting his prints away? That is certain to take some little time," and she bent down and kissed Mrs. Stapleton, who said —

"Then you'll find him in the study."

Stella did not answer, she gave a nod to Delia and went out of the room.

"Now you two girls don't sit up hair-brushing half the night," said Mrs. Stapleton to Delia. "You'll have plenty of time for gossiping to-morrow."

"But I'm not even going into her room, we settled that; I do believe she does feel tired, although she won't say so."

"Yet she was looking very well to-night."

"Yes, wasn't she? Mr. Barton thinks her awfully pretty; and as to Mr. Rodney, well, if I was Vivian I should feel rather jealous of that young man."

"Jealous! My dear Delia, there is no jealousy in the love of these days."

"Hm! I'm not so sure of that, aunty, provided you're dealing with the right article; but I agree that this is an age of sham and imitation, and I don't see how love is to escape counterfeit any more than old lace and diamonds. Well, I'm off too," and she bent down to say good-night.

"Good-night, dear; I'll say good-night to Vivian for you."

"Oh, don't be afraid, I'm far too discreet to interrupt the billing and cooing in the study," and she ran off laughing; but half-way up-stairs, catching

sight of Vivian coming from below, she called down,

"Bon soir, cousin, dormez-bien."

"Why, where are you off?" he answered.

"To lay my head upon the downy."

"Oh! what terrible creatures of habit you country folk are; to me there is nothing so detestable as going to bed with the lamb, except it is getting up with the lark."

"Beauty sleep to get, my friend. My fate is not sealed like some person's. Is she there?" stretching herself further over the banisters. "No? then good-night again," and away she ran.

"Was that Stella you were speaking to?" asked Mrs. Stapleton, as her son entered the drawing-room.

"No, I have not seen Stella."

Mrs. Stapleton's face spoke her surprise.

"Why, she has gone to bed! She complained of feeling sleepy. How very strange!"

"Well, upon my word, although I should have preferred to find her here, I cannot say that I see anything very remarkable in feeling sleepy and going to bed. If my confoundedly excitable brain allowed me to feel sleepy before the small hours of the morning, I should most decidedly follow her example."

"It wasn't that, dear, I meant; it was that she had not gone down to see you. I told her where you were and what was keeping you."

Apparently this fact was of no interest to Vivian,

or he did not care to discuss it. He selected the chair in which he would feel most comfortable, and drew it over to a table on which lay some books and periodicals. After the fashion of some excellent women, Mrs. Stapleton waited until her son had selected a magazine, had found an article to interest him, and was just settling to enjoy it; then she said in a voice full of trouble —

“Vivian, you don't think that Stella could have been put out in any way by the attention you paid to Madame Simon?”

Vivian raised his head slowly and sat looking at her.

“Attention—I—paid—to—Madame—Simon!”

“Well, my dear, frankly, a great many girls might have felt annoyed at it; Madame Simon is what may be called young and, in a certain style, good-looking, added to which she has the reputation of making herself very dangerously fascinating to those she takes a liking to, and one hardly needs two eyes to see how she regards you.”

Vivian took a paper-knife and put it in the place where he had begun to read, then shutting the book and laying it down he said —

“Has Stella spoken of this to you?”

“No, but actions often say more than words, and I could not help noticing that she seemed to rather purposely withdraw from the conversation which you and Madame Simon led. Then when we came up-stairs

she sat out on the balcony hardly speaking, and though Mr. Rodney tried all he could to induce her to join us in your study, he said it was impossible. I was quite surprised when she said she wanted to go to bed, but I had not the most remote idea that she would do so without going down to see you." Mrs. Stapleton paused, that due effect might be given to her words. Finding that her son made her no answer she continued — "You know, Vivian, that jealousy is a very curious thing, often quite beyond our own control. We would give the world not to show it, but we cannot help doing so. I know so much about the feeling, because in my day it was said that true love could not exist without jealousy, and I must say I think there is a great deal in it." —

"You make me most devoutly thankful, mother," — Vivian was assuming his most cynical tone — "that I was not condemned to live in this day of yours from which you are always quoting. If there is one thing more than another which would make me severe with Stella, it would be the suspicion that in the very remotest degree she could harbour against me the feeling of jealousy; for such a vulgar weakness in her I should have no toleration."

"Still I think you should put it to yourself, how would you like to see some one paying *her* very marked attention? Delia only to-night said, 'If I was Vivian I should be quite jealous of Mr. Rodney's evident admiration of Stella.'"

Vivian lifted up his hands and went through a dumb show of tearing his hair.

"That's it," he said, "bring us both down to the vulgar level of the ordinary engaged couple, who are expected to sit in each other's pockets, to have no manners or conversation, and whose one idea is to snatch an opportunity to sneak off to another room where they may be freed from every one else's society ; a very little of that, as I have told you before, would make me snap the very shadow of a fetter and fly the country."

"Oh, Vivian, you are so inconsistent," said Mrs. Stapleton aggrievedly. "You make it impossible to say a single word to you. From just a suggestion to fly off like this at a tangent."

"But consider what a suggestion ! That because Stella and I have come to certain agreements with each other, I am to be cut off from all communication with every other woman ; and in the case of a gifted creature like Madame Simon, with whose tastes and talents I am in perfect touch and sympathy, our intercourse is to be trammelled by the fear that I may be kindling jealousy in the breast of a girl who is barely out of the school-room. The very idea is so preposterous that it is not worth consideration ; if I thought otherwise, I give you my word I would teach Stella a lesson that would not be easily forgotten."

"There is one thing you seem to have forgotten," said Mrs. Stapleton severely, "and that is, that Stella

is no longer a child. She is in every way a woman, and a woman with very decided ideas and opinions of her own too."

"Opinions and ideas which I shall never interfere with, so long as they do not clash with mine; and when they do I think I can quite trust to my own firm handling of the reins, to convince Stella of what most persons who know me are perfectly aware of, that where I mean to be master I am master."

Mrs. Stapleton felt that rising lump in her throat which warned her that the weakness of tears was not far off. She sat silent, and her son after a few minutes continued —

"You imagined she was going to take such a very high stand about her family, see what it has all ended in; on her return the other evening, what did she tell me—that until then she had never dreamed of the great social difference there was between us, and only that I would not permit her to put into words what I saw was in her mind, she would then and there have begged me to release myself from any engagement. The plain fact is this, my dear mother, that you allow your very soft heart to run away with your head, and when Stella displays any small weakness, instead of at once crushing it you sympathize with her."

"I don't call it a weakness to show me her love for you, Vivian."

"A very great weakness if it prevents her being

able to see how much others appreciate me. You say that Delia spoke of Rodney's attentions to Stella. I could not be better pleased than by seeing men of his stamp admire her. I should have liked that she had shown a little more interest in Barton. He is a very rising man and might probably wish to paint her. It attracts notice to a woman's beauty seeing her portrait in the Academy."

"Well, my dear, I hope you will never have cause to regret this desire to foster in Stella a thirst for admiration. She is a sweet simple girl now, and I should deeply deplore her being turned into a professional beauty."

"Pray spare her the profanation of such a term; and I think I will retire to my own study, we are evidently at opposite poles of the earth to-night. It is not often, mother, that you so completely fail to understand your son."

And with the certainty that before he reached the door she would be entreating him to return, he gave her a cold "Good-night" and walked out of the room.

For the first time in his life Mrs. Stapleton allowed him to go without a remonstrance. She was sick at heart, and she was saying in spirit, "Poor child! poor child!"

A vague feeling possessed her, that as she had influenced the girl to love Vivian, so now she ought to warn her to consider well before she took the

final step which would irrevocably bind her. A hundred thoughts, desires, resolves crowded into her mind, but not being a woman of firm purpose or fixed will, she let them one by one fade away and die out, until, finally exhausted by such unusual mental agitation, in a very miserable frame of mind she crept off to bed.

CHAPTER XXII.

WITH all of us our characters need unravelling. Sometimes this development of quality is the slow result of gradual growth, sometimes it is the rapid effect of unforeseen circumstance. Up to the present point Stella Clarkson had let herself be borne along by the wind of chance like thistle-down. Suddenly this aimless drifting seemed arrested; she was brought to a standstill, pulled up, as it seemed to her, on the very brink of a precipice.

As with a melody which, though no longer heard, has such possession of us that, do or think as we may, its strains are still persistent, so was it with the words that Maynard Rodney had said; they haunted Stella, stirring and troubling her whole being by a new and undefined something that she wanted to put away from her.

A few days before, while reading to Mrs. Stapleton *Lady Lee's Widowhood*, a favourite novel with Marraine, Stella had been much amused at a passage, which described a kiss from Sir Joseph as having had no more effect on his lady than if "she flattened her nose against a pane of glass." Marraine had said she quite understood the compari-

son, and Stella had laughed at her sentimentality. Now the full meaning seemed to burst upon her, and, as she eyed askance her hand, each finger-tip tingled again, as when Maynard Rodney clasped them at parting.

"I must be a very wicked girl," she said; and she said it aloud, as if she wished to impress upon herself the fact; "bad, abandoned, or, knowing that I am the promised wife of one man, I should never be thinking like this of another." And then, unconsciously listening with the ears of her heart to the words that went on singing through her brain, she began to ponder on the mystery with which *he* had invested love; how he had said that, until alive to its full meaning, one might be satisfied by its counterfeit. He had spoken, too, of the mingled pain and pleasure felt when love was born. Could that be?—and if so, where were the joys and pangs which should have troubled her when Vivian pleaded his suit? Still, natures might differ. With some affections were tumultuous; with others tranquil. Hers!—but here she stopped, unwilling to search too deeply down, and overcome by a profound sense of having in some way acted wrongly.

Candid and truthful by nature, it seemed terrible, even in thought, to her to fall away from the allegiance she owed to Vivian. To be open-eyed to his faults, to look on him as aught else but the perfect being she had always held him to be, was the up-

rooting of all those tenets which had been ingrafted in her from her very childhood. She recalled the feeling of gratification it had given her to be preferred by Vivian; and though there arose the consciousness that this feeling, and much that followed in its train, had been fostered by Marraine, and owed its very birth to the affection she felt for her, she gauged the strength of her own character with sufficient precision, to see that she had allowed herself to drift into a position which neither force nor mere wordly interest would have made her accept.

It is perhaps a more difficult task than is sometimes admitted, to argue ourselves into a belief that wrong is right, bad is good, black is white; and yet, at one time or other of our lives most of us try to do it. Through the small hours of the night, and long after the dawn of morning, Stella lay trying to solve the problem of the real state of her feelings towards Vivian, but to the end the unknown truth remained undiscovered. Only one deduction had she drawn: that whatever mistake or failure might arise, the blame was entirely her own — hers to carry and to endure, and for this cause she must keep a strict watch on tongue and eye and ear — those outposts of the senses which so often draw and lead us into danger. Even the luxury of tears she now refused herself, saying, as she brushed some drops away with that want of compromise so characteristic of youth — “I have no reason to cry, I mean to make him and

myself happy." And after this she got up, and taking out a photograph of Vivian, she impressed on it a very solemn kiss, and in a most humble state of mind she laid her head upon the pillow, this time to fall at once into a heavy sleep.

At the breakfast-table the next morning the two girls found themselves alone. Mrs. Stapleton did not feel well enough to join them. Delia was in her usual cheery spirits, and Stella did her best to accommodate her own more serious mood to her visitor's buoyancy. Their school-days were discussed, their old school-fellows talked over — what had become of this girl and that? how such an one was married, and another about to be; until Delia said — "Do you know, I think it's great nonsense this not wanting people to know that you and Vivian are engaged. I don't believe you mind, Stella; do you?"

"Not in the least. Vivian wishes it; but I don't care."

"Now that's just what father said, that he was sure it was one of *his* fads, and it's so ridiculous, because he speaks as if you were to be married almost directly. Mother asked him what they'd think when you were getting your trousseau, and guess what his answer was."

Stella shook her head to intimate that such a guess was impossible.

"That in his opinion a trousseau was perfectly unnecessary. Pretty strong form that, don't you think?"

So far as I can see, *that* and the cake and the honeymoon are quite the best things in a wedding." Then seeing that Stella only smiled, she added, "Ah, well! I'm glad it's you he has chosen, you and not me."

"So am I; it would never have done for us two to have been rivals."

Delia was silent for a few moments, then she said, "By the way, what became of you last night? You did not stop long in the study."

"I did not go down to the study."

The words cost Stella an effort.

"Did not go down! Why, do you mean that you did not bid Vivian good-night?"

Stella bent over her cup, feeling that her face must be as red as a peony.

"I cannot think what could have been the matter with me last night," she began, in a tone of apology. "I felt I must run off to bed without wanting to say a word to anybody. Don't you know that sort of — a —"

"I know exactly, and then one doesn't want to be fussed over. Only I'm not sure I should feel that with a lover. I fancy it wouldn't be half bad with him."

"Oh — I don't know."

"No, I don't believe you do. Not with Vivian," and she made a little grimace of distaste. "Don't be angry, Stella; but positively it is impossible to conjure up the superfine Vivian in love. I don't say

that he may not drop upon one knee, and perhaps go so far as to impress a kiss upon your marble brow; but anything beyond that—no. Well, that wouldn't suit me; I wonder it does you. I can't think what made you accept him."

"You seem to forget how talented and clever he is," said Stella, reproachfully.

"Excuse me, my dear, you don't get the chance given you here. When he is not blowing his own trumpet aunty is, and if they stop you begin. The rest of us are so grateful that he is our only genius. I verily believe that when he comes down to Stillmere father adds a clause of thankfulness to the family devotions that he has not been blessed with such a Solomon as Vivian. We can't live up to him; he puts on too many frills for us altogether."

"Delia!"

"It's the æsthetic atmosphere, my love. I should grow quite fast and slangy if I lived here. At home I am a most well-conducted, ladylike young person, and that is why," she added irrelevantly, "I have my own doubts whether Vivian *is* so unutterably clever. Compare him with any one else you know. Mr. Rodney, now—he is a very clever man, they say. Well, is he like Vivian, I ask you?"

"That says nothing; they may both be very clever, and yet one quite the opposite of the other."

"Well, that certainly they are. Not that I have any reason to exalt Mr. Rodney; he hardly deigned

to cast a look in my direction. When I did make a remark on anything he was saying, it was like the song, 'No catching the Speaker's Eye,' that was glued on the young lady he took in to dinner."

Stella shook her head.

"Oh, I forgive him," she continued; "only it did rather tickle me when aunty was so anxious about your not having come down to the study. It couldn't have been so distractingly dull out on the balcony in the company of such a good-looking man." Then catching sight of a sudden expression which came into Stella's face, she jumped up and ran to her side, saying, "Did it tease it? It won't do so any more. Never mind! Besides, what's the good of having gone to school together if we can't be candid with each other? Why, you're crying, Stella." Stella hid her face more completely from view. "Yes, you are. Oh, I haven't said anything to wound you, have I? You know what a rattle-brain I am; but I wouldn't give you a moment's pain for the world, Stella. You believe that, don't you?"

"I really think I must be going to be ill," said poor Stella, drying her eyes. "It is so silly of me. I was never like this before."

"H'm! perhaps it is because you were never engaged before. I am speaking seriously now, for it's my belief you have been drawn into it principally because of your love for aunty. We all think the same. Uncle Sam says if he had thought you were

to be persuaded into a husband he wouldn't have given Vivian a chance of proposing to you. Now that's what I call a downright *bonâ fide* compliment from a confirmed old bachelor of sixty."

Stella was again smiling.

"Delia, dear," she said, "promise me not to say anything about my — stupidity, not even to think about it, or what could have caused it. I know in some things Vivian may be thought peculiar, but then I also know that I am rather the same, so that we are likely to suit each other better than perhaps our friends think we shall. Remember that I have known him very intimately for all the years I have lived here, and believe me there is much good in him which those who only see him occasionally would hardly give him credit for."

"Oh, Stella, please don't preach, or if you do, take some other text than Vivian. If ever he becomes your husband I'll try to" — and she feigned to be swallowing something with a great effort — "like him better, but so long as he's only my cousin do let me dislike him to my heart's desire."

"And you his favourite cousin too!" said Stella, reproachfully.

"For that very reason, then, I claim to enjoy some small amount of privilege."

CHAPTER XXIII.

It was the middle of the day before Stella and Vivian met, and then the interview was of her seeking. Feeling that some apology was due to him for her brusque disappearance the night before, she went down to his study and tapped at the door, saying —

“Any admittance; it’s I — Stella.”

Vivian got up and quickly opened the door. Like many another man, he was more an autocrat in theory than he was ever likely to be in practice. When talking, especially with his mother, he blustered about what he would do, and what he would not stand. In disposition, then, he was a tyrant, but once face to face with Stella and this overbearing mood was dropped, and sometimes, in spite of himself, he became the best similitude he could offer of a lover.

“Good-morning,” he said, with a slight elevation of his eyebrows. Then drawing her inside the room, he believed he was answering an invitation she gave when he pressed his lips on the cheek near him.

Stella was not in the habit of being haunted by *Lady Lee’s Widowhood*, yet at that moment some

imp of mischief popped the passage about the kiss into her brain. She resented the intrusion so fiercely that the color mounted to her face, and Vivian, knowing that this often heralded a penitent confession, turned on her eyes full of meaning as he added—

“So you had taken flight last night by the time I reached the drawing-room. What was the reason of that, eh?”

“I don’t wonder at your asking,” she said, with a pretty air of contrition. “I have asked myself the same question. It was not the going to bed, it was not saying good-night to everybody.”

“Everybody need not have included me. I was certainly not aware that I was guilty of anything that merited punishment.”

“No,” she said, not in the least understanding to what he alluded, “it was only perverseness in me;” and leaning her head against his shoulder she added, “I have come on purpose that you should scold me.”

“That is a very skilful way of turning aside wrath,” and he gave a little pat to her cheek. “I find it impossible to chide at command.”

“Then you forgive me?” she said, raising her eyes to his.

“Forgive you for what?” he asked, framing the sweet face with his hands.

“I don’t think I am quite clear about what. It’s rather like I used to be when I was a little child. I

feel I have not been good, but I cannot quite explain how I have been naughty."

"Ah, well! there are some things that it is better we should never try to explain."

"Do you think so?"

"I do."

"Well, no, I do not agree with you there. I should wish to feel such confidence in the one I loved most, that I could bring all my follies, and faults, and weaknesses to be cured by him, feeling sure that, however much his head might blame, his heart would find excuses for me."

"That sounds very sweet and confiding, but I am not at all sure it would stand the test of trial. To begin with, it would probably entail a state of friction before the weaknesses and follies were acknowledged, and that, were it my case, would chafe me. My nature is not an easy one. I could look over a crime sooner than I could tolerate a *banalité*." Then seeing she was looking at him wonderingly, he added, "I am not defending myself; I simply state what I know I am."

"But I don't see where *banalité* comes in."

"Perhaps because you may not be taking the word in its widest sense. To me, when we give way to any feeling or action practised by the multitude of dull, prosaic, common-place men and women, we descend to the level of the vulgar herd. I am not in this alluding to their social position, but to their

mental temperament ; and it is this which leads me to entreat you, for our future happiness, to guard yourself against even the shadow of a Vandalism of this kind ; it would so disappoint the very high standard I have formed for you."

Stella felt puzzled. What could he be driving at ? Only that it was Vivian — who at times would talk for an hour without any one being able to guess at his meaning — she would have put the question more plainly to him ; but in these vague moods nothing irritated him so much as being asked to explain. It would be wiser therefore not to run the risk of vexing him, but to conciliate him by a soft answer.

"I hope you know," she said, "that I am trying and intend to try more, to grow into what you wish me to be."

"Dear little one," he murmured, approvingly.

"But you must strive to be patient, and above all, Vivian, you must love me."

"Have I not shown that to you already ? What other reason could make me choose you as my companion — the woman who will bear my name — my wife ?"

Had he been about to place an imperial crown upon her brow he could hardly have given the idea of conferring a greater honour. Stella felt the tone jar on that inner self which, in spite of every effort, remained rife for rebellion.

"Yes, I know ; but, Vivian, there are times — oh,

you must have had the feeling yourself — when there comes a sudden drought in our affections which seems to create in us an insatiable — an unconquerable desire to know that we are loved ; that the he or she we have chosen is the being who will satisfy this craving, and so fill our hearts that in them there will be no room for any one else."

Oh! at last the cat was out of the bag! — no doubt now he should be treated to something about Madame Simon, and with a slight sneer in his tone he said —

"Isn't this a somewhat over-romantic state of feeling?"

The sneer stung Stella, but she would not give way to resentment.

"Not to my mind," she said gravely. "And if it should be so, it is still the feeling I am suffering from ; and if you cannot understand me, why —" She did not finish the sentence, but looked at him with eyes at once appealing and reproachful.

"I wonder," he said slowly, "do I understand you — do we understand each other?"

"That is a question I have often asked myself of late."

"You have?" he said quickly, in an altered tone ; "and for what reason, pray?"

"Oh, the reasons we need not enter into. Your own recollection will doubtless supply some of them."

"Whatever my recollections supply are causes that are past and done with—I never rake up or return to by-gones."

"That is very considerate and generous of you; but in a case which so greatly affects the happiness of us both, I feel we cannot speak too plainly to one another, especially now, when, with the exception of our own families, no one knows for certain of the tie that binds us, or that you have ever spoken to me. We could at present withdraw from the position we hold without the *amour propre* of either suffering in the very smallest degree."

She paused, and he looked at her, astounded at the very unexpected way in which he had been taken.

"Do you know, Stella, that far more than the surprise is the pain you give me. What makes you suddenly speak in this way? Did anything in what occurred last evening suggest these thoughts to you?"

Before Stella could speak, she was conscious that the hot colour was slowly mounting her cheeks, steadily increasing until it had reached the very roots of her hair. Conscious, too, that Vivian's eyes were fixed on her as if they read every secret that her heart held, saw each image that its inmost recesses reflected, her confusion seemed to paralyze her tongue.

"You do not answer," he said, with a covert smile. "Ah, well, I must draw my own conclusions;" and

at that instant these seemed anything but unflattering to him. Where such jealousy existed there must be great love, and in spite of all his theories and axioms, the desire to be paramount in the heart of the woman he had chosen was as potent with Vivian as with other men.

"My dear little girl," he began, and his tone this time was almost paternal, "you must try and remember that, being very young, you can know but little of our world, and of the men and women who make it. Doubtless you will see, possibly you think you already *have* seen, certain phases of society which give you some surprise — preferences shown, attentions paid, confidences given, intercourse sought; and by these some passion and emotion you never felt before is roused in you, and is connected by you with one particular person."

The colour which had been dying away returned to Stella's cheeks again — a fact not lost on Vivian.

"I am not going to further particularize," he said, reassuringly, "in my opinion names should always be left out in explanations of this kind; but I want you to bear in mind, both now and for the future, that all these *petits-soins* have no meaning outside the idle hour they are paid in. A man who knows he has the gift of conversation is naturally charmed to find a receptive woman — the higher his cultivation the deeper is he stirred by what he is saying; she, if in sympathy, will reciprocate his feeling, which nat-

urally gives him pleasure — pleasure that would turn to dire confusion if for one single moment he supposed himself seriously taken. Do you follow me, Stella?"

"I think I do," she said humbly, her downcast lids drooping lower at the mere suspicion that not only had her vanity perhaps led her astray, but it had been sufficiently patent to make Vivian alive to her error. Later on she would judge the whole matter more reasonably, but at this moment she only felt dazed — dazed and filled with confusion.

"Well now," he began, cheerfully, "when a little mistake of this kind has arisen, what is the best thing to do?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, but I do; I will show you," and he put his hand under her chin and raised her head. "Take example by the children — kiss and be friends again, shall we?"

"Yes, and thank you." She still avoided looking at him. "I feel you have been very kind."

"If I ever fail, it is what I always wish to be, for the certainty that I have now your heart so completely is a great happiness to me."

Involuntarily Stella heaved a sigh.

"No, no," he continued, "we must have no more sighing, only nothing like this must ever happen again. How shall we prevent it — say?"

"I think the best way would be by letting people know that we are engaged to each other."

A smile came into Vivian's face as he listened to her. To himself he was thinking, "Isn't that a woman all over? Human eels they are. However firm you may think you hold them, they'll manage to slip through, and wriggle back to the idea that started them."

"Certainly, if it is your desire," he was saying, "I will make it my business to do so. After all, I believe the best thing will be to send to the papers a paragraph announcing our approaching marriage."

"Marriage!" she repeated.

"Marriage," he echoed, "and the sooner the better; there will be none of these stupid misunderstandings after we two are one."

CHAPTER XXIV.

MAYNARD RODNEY was in love. For four days — after that eventful dinner-party — he had persisted in deceiving, cozening, hood-winking himself. Suddenly his stratagems failed him, he laid down his arms and confessed his folly — “Write me down an ass” was the theme of his reflections set forth in language more forcible than complimentary. “If there was the faintest chance of any hope, if that other fellow was not in the way, if she was any other girl — Ah!” and he threw himself back in the chair, and stretched himself out so as to disturb Rags, who first looked at him protestingly, and then with a canine suspicion that all was not right, slowly uncurled herself, stole over, and licked his hand in sympathy.

“Sorry for him old girl?” he said, stroking the ear which she leaned against him. “Had the complaint yourself, eh? — Oh, Rags! if you could only see her, but she wouldn’t give us the chance, would she? Promised she’d come here to tea, and then fobbed us off with a prior engagement they had forgotten. I wonder what she thinks? a man who goes so near to making a fool of himself can’t expect much mercy — and yet —” and there followed a long rev-

erie broken by, "What the deuce they do with themselves I can't think — I've been in the Row, in the Park, I've tramped like a sandwich-man up and down Bond Street, Piccadilly, Regent Street, not a sign of them. Except on the blind I've never seen her shadow, and very likely that was somebody else's. I always thought that if ever my time did come I should have the complaint badly, but I've surpassed myself. A raw lad of seventeen isn't in it with me, and they tell you that people who write expend all their feelings on their paper. There's been very little expenditure on paper from me this past week, I have not even the ghost of an idea. It has taken all my intellectual capacity to decide on the colour of the carnation I should wear. To such depths have the mighty fallen that we buy button-holes, Rags, and put on patent-leather boots. Faugh!"

"Bouf!" said Rags sharply.

"Quite right, my dog, I agree with you. An end must be put to such folly," and he plunged into a fresh set of dreams while he sat looking at the clock, which pointed to something after five. Suddenly he jumped up saying to himself, "There can't be anything extraordinary in paying a call — I shall have to do it now or later, having dined there it's expected of one — and afterwards I'll look in at the club and see what the fellows are doing; a run over to Brittany mightn't be a bad thing for me. They'll be leaving town presently — got a lovely country place, I dare

say. What an odd thing that from the moment I saw him I detested that Stapleton. Now the very sight of the fellow is like poison to me."

After which very charitable sentiment Mr. Maynard Rodney paid most undue attention to his personal appearance, went down into the street, hailed a hansom cab, and directed the man to drive to Kensington. At Hyde Park Gate he decided to get out and walk the rest of the way; his courage was rather on the decline. To tell the truth he had been on an expedition of the same sort before, and had turned back. He had taken a stroll down that way the previous evening, and by loitering about the house until a late hour had awakened suspicion in the breast of an over-zealous policeman.

Of course they would be out, of that he had not the slightest doubt, but then, — and this was by way of giving a flip to his resolution — the thing would be ended, he should have called, and he could not call again.

The rat-tat-a-tat-tat he gave to the knocker seemed to find an echo somewhere in the direction of his heart, which was still thumping as he asked for Mrs. Stapleton.

"Not at home, sir," was the answer; and then, the butler recollected that this was the gentleman he had "observed" out on the balcony with Miss Stella, and she being as the very apple of his eye to him, he felt she might not be wholly displeased if he volun-

teered the information, "but I think the young ladies are"; after which, drawing his own conclusions by the alacrity shown by the visitor in following him upstairs, he added, "At least I know Miss Stella was in the boudoir," and he threw open the door of that room, and announced in pompous monotone:

"Mr. Maynard Rodney."

Now the last thing Stella wished was to betray that she was surprised, pleased, or disconcerted. Since Vivian had spoken to her she had had time to enter into herself, and examine into the cause of the confusion that his reproofs had occasioned her, and she had rightly decided that the trouble she felt arose from her own self-consciousness of feelings, which others were little likely to guess at. She had imposed upon herself a course of action, one feature of which was a determination to avoid meeting Maynard Rodney. Even to herself she gave no reason for this, merely saying it was better for a time to see less of other people and more of Vivian, who, since their conversation, had been unusually devoted to her.

"Mr. Maynard Rodney," she repeated — and she felt she must have said it aloud — and the next thing she was conscious of was that she was blushing, smiling, and that she could not remember anything to say.

Could she have known it, Maynard Rodney's feelings were of a very similar description. "What a fool I must be looking," he was thinking; but he

was saying — and she thought with such charming ease of manner — “When the servant told me that you were at home, I could not resist coming in. I hope I am not intruding on you?”

“Not at all, but Mrs. Stapleton is out. I’m so sorry.”

He tried to make his face as long as possible as he said, “Is she? Oh!”

“Yes, it is such a lovely day.”

“Perfect. I hadn’t the slightest idea that I should find any one at home.”

“Was it for that reason you called then?”

“Yes, for that very reason; how clear-sighted you are;” and then they looked at each other and both laughed, and at once the ice was broken.

Rodney put down his hat and drew over a chair. “You see,” he said, “I have come to have a gossip with you — you will not get rid of me?”

“Do I look as if I wanted to?”

“I’ll try to think not, which is generous in me, because I have a great grudge against you.”

“Against me!”

“Oh, don’t look as if you did not know why. It was you who upset my tea party.”

Stella’s face was aflame. “Indeed, really,” she began — for the accusation was a true one, “no — I do confess to not sending Polly because they all said no one in their right senses — if they knew anything about parrots — would offer to take one.”

"But that is just what I do know, — a great deal about parrots. At the present time I have one belonging to me."

"At your own home?"

"Well, no; he is away for change of air."

"Am I to believe you?"

"Certainly — you do not suppose that you have a monopoly of parrots, any more than you have of sailor brothers. I have both the one and the other."

"A sailor brother! what you? A real sailor is he?"

"Ah, it is well you put that question to me and not to him. He is in all the pomp and glory of being third mate of one of the Castle line of Cape Steamers."

"But that is like Edgar; how very extraordinary!"

"I think not — that is, not when you know. You and I have other things somewhat in common."

"Yes?" The face she turned to him was full of interest.

"I, too, have a story — not a pretty romance like the little girl's, but just a plain, unvarnished tale of a boy, whose parents had very small means and a large family; and an uncle offered to take him, and send him to school, which he did, and after that to college; and then the uncle died, and the boy had to go out into the world, and earn his daily bread."

For an instant her eyes looked at him with astonishment. "But that was not you?" she said, in a tone of inquiry.

letter informed Mrs. Clarkson that the season being so far advanced Stella would not return to London, but after being joined by Mrs. Stapleton and Vivian she would go on to their own country house where they would remain until October.

Already James Clarkson had given notice to leave his situation. After the 29th of September he would be an idle man, and referring to the income which Stella had been arranging with her guardian, Mr. Trevor, to allow her father, Vivian had suggested that she should send her mother a cheque so that the whole family might, to mark the event, enjoy a sea-side holiday. Stella's gratification at his forethought was so effusive, that Vivian more than suspected she guessed the real motive of his proposition, and was in sympathy with it; but as she did not again refer to the matter it dropped out of his memory.

The Stapletons had been in London about a week when — the two ladies having gone to keep an appointment with the dressmaker — Mrs. Stapleton returned alone.

"Where is Stella?" was Vivian's first question. On hearing some one come in, he had run up to the boudoir.

"Oh! she asked me to say to you," said Mrs. Stapleton, hesitatingly, "that, remembering that you and she have no engagement together this afternoon, she has taken the opportunity of going to see her mother."

A cloud overshadowed Vivian's face.

"Her mother!" he repeated, "I thought I was given to understand that the whole family had gone to some place by the sea and were to stay there for a time."

"So they have, but the sailor brother is going to sea again, and it is something to do with getting his outfit ready that the mother has come up about. You see," she added, "it is a long time now since Stella saw any of them."

"So long," he said, irritably, "that I hoped she had grown sensible enough to recognize the absurd folly of maintaining any intercourse between herself and those who are as far apart from her as the two poles— Of course, I know that now it is of no earthly use to repeat it, but so long as I live, mother, I shall consider that you were most culpable in ever permitting Stella to go near her family, and the whole of the vexation arising from these obnoxious connections I hold to be entirely due to your want of discretion and mismanagement."

Mrs. Stapleton ought to have seen that her son was lashing himself into one of his very worst moods. Experience should have taught her that if she wished to avert this she had better avoid argument; but this question of Stella and her parents was a subject which always roused her, for the reason that in then yielding to her better instincts she had gained the first victory over her worldly self. Added to which

she had always felt a great respect for Mrs. Clarkson, and had cherished a feeling that if she was ever in distress or difficulty Stella's mother was a woman on whose sympathy she could rely. In a tone, therefore, more decided than she was in the habit of using to her son, she said —

"In spite of what you may say, Vivian, I cannot look on you as a competent censor of my actions. Should you ever be a parent yourself you will, I think, understand how impossible it was for me—a mother—to deny to another mother access to her child. Had I shown myself such a monster, I should have expected that some terrible calamity would have happened to *you*."

"Well, and I think some terrible calamity *has* happened to me."

"Calamity! In what way do you mean?"

"I mean that, if at every amusement to which I go I am to be in dread of meeting those vulgar, grinning creatures, and of hearing them accost Stella as their sister,—well, if they refuse to put the breadth of the ocean between them and me, why I must put it between me and them. I only hope," he blustered, after a moment's pause, "that it will not occur to any one to desire to try me too high, or in one of my uncontrollable moods I shall be driven to seek that refuge before I am many days older."

In past days the effect of this threat would have been to reduce Mrs. Stapleton to tears, but many

circumstances had combined to make her more alive to certain faults in her son's character which she bitterly repented that she had not striven to conquer, and she was constantly endeavouring to screen these imperfections from Stella, fearing the effect they might have in lessening the girl's high opinion of him.

"Would it not be wise," she said coldly, "to acquaint Stella with these prejudices. I feel sure she has not an idea how very strong they are. I believe—and indeed I have little doubt—but that after your marriage Stella and her family will gradually drift apart; but nothing could be more fatal, for the end you desire, than to insist, with a girl like Stella, that the separation should be immediate and entire. Knowing her as I do—I—"

But here Vivian broke in with an incredulous laugh.

"*You* know Stella, mother? that is just what you do not know and never will, for if you were to live for a hundred years, you would go on taking persons literally and would implicitly believe that what they say they mean."

"If so I only judge others by myself," said Mrs. Stapleton loftily. "However, I am very glad to hear what you tell me, for *you* say many things, Vivian, that it would comfort me to feel were not meant by a son of mine."

This unexpected retort from his worshipping mother electrified Vivian. He had a dazed feeling

that he was losing his hold on every one, that his prestige was departing from him, and the thought did not come pleasantly to him. He retained sufficient self-control to feel that he would be unwise to say any more, and that his best alternative was an immediate retreat; therefore, without vouchsafing any reply, he walked out of the room, leaving Mrs. Stapleton a prey to reflections which constantly gave her anxiety. The eyes of affection are sharp, and she could not be blind to the change that had come to Stella.

Towards her Vivian was more attentive and considerate than his mother had ever thought to see him; attentions, which, at times, were received with an irresponsive composure nearly amounting to indifference. Had it been any other than Vivian whom Stella was about to marry, Mrs. Stapleton would have felt it a duty to question the girl closely, and to entreat her to give to her, her all but in name "mother," her confidence; but deep down in her heart there lay a suspicion which if stirred ever so lightly might turn into a certainty, and she had built such high hopes on Stella becoming her daughter, that she tried to smother the fear by telling herself that marriage would bring affection, and that the indissoluble knot once tied Stella would settle into her former sympathetic, loving self. That morning when Stella had suddenly said that she thought she would go and see her mother, although Mrs. Stapleton knew

of a dozen hindrances against the plan, she could not find it in her heart to raise an objection. She kissed her daughter-in-law elect more tenderly than of late she had dared do, for Stella's spirits had become so uneven that at the least show of affection from her it was never certain whether she would laugh or cry.

This unexpected visit from her daughter, after such a long interval of absence, was delightful to Mrs. Clarkson. She had come up to London for a few days to look after Edgar, who had been given an appointment which was promotion for him. The rest of the family were at Herne Bay, chosen by them because there Mr. and Mrs. Clarkson had spent the week of their honeymoon.

"And when we're walking together—father and me," she said, "as we say, in some things it seems as if it was only yesterday. Ah, my dear, I trust that when nearly thirty years of married life have passed over your heads, you and your husband may be as much one in heart and mind as we two are."

Stella did not reply, she had turned away to take off her hat, but kneeling down by her mother's side, she said:—

"I am so glad to find you alone so that I can have you all to myself, dear. I want to feel that I am your little child again—the little Stella I was before I ever went away, so put both arms round me and make me your own cosset."

"My precious lamb," said Mrs. Clarkson, pressing the girl close to her, "why, it's never crying, to be sure? Dear, dear, now that brings to my mind how I was like that before my wedding day, they used to laugh at home, and say you'd only to hold up your finger and you'd get a cry out of Charlotte."

"It's so good to cry," sobbed Stella.

"Then cry away, darling, mother will comfort you. I can see what it is. Everything coming at once has been too much for you—the settling of the money and the thought of the wedding, and getting everything ready—why each is a business in itself but you must remember you'll soon have a help-mate to carry the largest half of the burden, and don't forget to tell him how much we're all enjoying the holiday. I wish he could see those two girls. I do believe he'd say there was half the value of the money in looking on at them. Their spirits all but drive me and father crazy, but, as I say, it isn't for long, and it's the first time."

"It was kind of him, mother, was it not? It was quite his own proposal."

"My dear, it was more than any one could have expected. It shows me the love he bears to you. And then the liberality of the sum you sent, why it would pay our expenses twice over."

"What is the good of money to me, unless I can make those I love happy?"

"Happy, Stella! Oh, if you could but see father.

He was brought up a country lad, you know, and all these years he's lived on the thoughts of those fields and lanes, and he's longed to go and see them again, but of course he couldn't."

"Why not?"

"Well, our early days, my dear, were a great struggle. For many years after you left us it was a hard fight to pay our way and keep the wolf from the door; but we managed it, and it's all at an end now, thanks to our dear child to whom we owe it all."

"Who owes it all to you. It's but a very poor return for the sacrifice you and father made."

"Well, yes; at the time, it *was* a sacrifice, my dear. And I shall never forget that night when I got back home after leaving you with Mrs. Stapleton. I was so bitter with my lot that my heart just seemed on fire. I was younger in years, you see, then, and the sight of all that elegance made me rebel. I felt that I'd that within me that could enjoy refinement and become better by it, and that fate had set me among surroundings that must in time drag me down, so that in the years to come the child I had left to be brought up in that luxury would have nothing in common with me, and oh!" and she winced as if even the thought stabbed her, "but that was a sharp thorn."

This insight into what had so nearly happened filled Stella with compunction. Fixing her eyes on her mother's face, she seemed pleading for forgiveness.

"My darling," continued Mrs. Clarkson, answering the look, "instead of that, see what has happened; all that thoughtful love could do for our comfort, you have done, and the best proof that riches haven't spoilt you is given by your coming to your humble home, and asking your mother to take you in her arms, and make you her own little child again. Oughtn't I to be grateful for God's goodness?" and she wiped away the tears that had welled up into her eyes. "Think, if instead you'd just offered to pension us off like we hear of sometimes, as if poor parents were servants or strangers. Why, my proud heart would have broken before it could have brooked that from one who owed her being to me, and I should have starved before I would have accepted a farthing of such money."

Secure that that indignity had never occurred to her mind, Stella could give her mother an embrace which Mrs. Clarkson heartily returned, saying:— "Now, then, to hear all you've got to tell me, and I must recollect it too, for the girls are wild to know everything about the wedding."

"And you, mother, don't you want to know, too?"

"I, my dear!" and into Mrs. Clarkson's face came that tender yearning expression which is the index of great love with great self-restraint; "why, I was only saying to father what I'd give if I could hide myself in some hole or corner where I could look on at it all

and not be seen, and, dear fellow, he said that was just what he'd been thinking."

"But mother, of course you and father must come to my wedding."

Up to that moment Stella had not decided what she meant to do, but her mother's wish settled the question.

"Not among the gay company, my dear. Oh no, we should be very out of place there — and give no pleasure to you, or to ourselves, or to anybody."

"But if I wish it," urged Stella.

"Yes dear, but you musn't wish it. In that you must be guided by me. Mr. Stapleton may not be, and I'm sure he isn't, ashamed of your relations, nor ashamed of the world knowing that they're in humble circumstances; but knowing and seeing are two different things, so until you're married and settled, my dear, we'll keep in the background. That'll give us time to put some polish on," she said in her merry way. "You'd be surprised at the change in father since he's done with that office drudgery; I tell him he looks a half a foot taller he holds his head so high, and he's so particular about his clothes, and how I am looking. Oh! it does my heart good to see him able to take a walk at his leisure, and enjoy the beautiful works of nature for which he had always such a loving eye."

"Dear father!" said Stella.

"Yes, he isn't by any means a common man. It wouldn't a bit surprise me if, when he comes to know him, Mr. Stapleton wasn't very much struck with father."

Stella could make no response to that, and the little jar a knowledge of Vivian's idiosyncracies gave her made her exclaim with seeming irrelevance, "Oh, mother, I wish I was going to marry some one whose parents were just what mine are, a man who had to work so that I could feel proud of him. Life would seem so much better worth having."

Mrs. Clarkson opened her eyes in amazement, and then regarding it as a romantic sentiment of youth, she said smilingly, "Why, with your bringing up wherever would such a man be found? He'd have to be made to order for you, a sort of prince in work-a-day clothes;" but Stella was not listening, her eyes seemed trying to follow her thoughts which had strayed far away. When she pulled them back and forced herself to be interested in what her mother was saying, Mrs. Clarkson was deep in descriptions of the bright future that was opening out for the whole family. A house was to be found that would be suitable to their improved circumstances. By the help of the substantial sum to be given to her, Carry's young man was to purchase a business so that they might marry soon. Lottie was to give up her situation and live with her parents. And on his return from the voyage he

was then going, Edgar would find he had not been forgotten.

In the contemplation of these pleasant anticipations the time seemed to fly, and, when at length Stella bade her mother good-bye, it was with a promise that before the end of the week she would come again, so that she might have an opportunity of seeing Edgar.

"And it has just occurred to me that we might all go to some entertainment together. Why not?"

Mrs. Clarkson laughed delightedly. "Oh, that would be a treat," she said; "and wouldn't the dear fellow be proud at escorting mother and his sister Stella."

"Then that is what we'll do, so let me know on what day he gets his leave and I will come for you."

CHAPTER XXVII.

ALTHOUGH before parting Stella had again referred to her wish for her parents to be present at her wedding Mrs. Clarkson remained firm in her refusal.

"Well, at all events, mother, when the time comes I shall send you an invitation," said Stella finally.

"Ah, that's a different thing altogether, my dear, for the sending us an invitation I shall thank you ; that will be showing proper respect to me and to your father, and enabling us to say that though we mayn't think fit to go, not only has our child wished it, but her husband has paid us the compliment too ; and you'll remember to say everything that is proper to Mr. Stapleton, and, when he proposes our coming, give him our reasons in whatever words you think most fitting."

During the drive back Stella had occupied herself by recalling this and much more that her mother had said. It gave her a closer insight into her mother's character, and made her realize how terribly the sordid cares of life may interfere with cultivation of the mind and refinement of manner. She was still deep in these reveries when the horse stopped, but before she could get out of the cab Vivian had opened the door and was standing ready to assist her.

He had been suffering for hours from the impatience of love, acting on great irritability of temper. He had walked up the road, he had stood at the window, had fancied that he had heard a cab stop twenty times until, when Stella actually arrived, he had worked himself into a positive fever.

"At last," he said, heaving a sigh of relief as he lifted her down.

"At last?" she echoed; "why — am I late? Did you expect me before? I said to Marraine that I should only leave myself time to dress for dinner." And, having passed by the servants and reached the inner hall, she asked smilingly — for she felt more gay and at ease than she had felt since their return to town — "And what have you been doing with yourself all the day?"

"Looking at the clock, counting the minutes, thinking the hands never went so slowly before, and listening to the pendulum echoing the cry of my impatient heart, 'When will she come — when will she come?'"

"Oh! but I shall have to go away again if I get such pretty speeches from you. It must be true that 'absence makes the heart grow fonder.'"

"No, no," he said, quickly, "you mustn't laugh, dear — I cannot bear it to-day. My nerves are stretched to their utmost tension. The very slightest tone jars on them."

"I wonder what is the reason," she said calmly.

"You have been so much better in that way lately. Haven't you?"

"Well, yes and no," and he laid his hand on her shoulder and looked down at her. "Sometimes I wonder do you ever realize what a smothered volcano you often have near you."

"Now you are trying to frighten me," she said smiling.

"I might try a very long time before I should succeed." He spoke sharply as if even still having to battle with irritation.

"I really do believe that now you would," she answered, and the smile melted into a laugh. "It's true, I am no longer one bit afraid of you. I used to be terrified. If I thought I had done anything to offend you, oh! how miserable I was."

"Ah! and then you loved me," he said reproachfully.

"No, it was not love; it was that I did not believe that the world contained another such paragon, and I positively worshipped you. Come now, it's your turn," she added, finding he did not answer her. "Can you not pay the same compliment to me?"

"I should think that of late I had shown you that I was doing so—a mistake on my part, for, like the rest of your sex, once let you see that you have a man in your power, and he isn't worth the snap of a finger to you."

"Come, come, come," she said, "what is the mean-

ing of all this treason? I must run up to Marraine and ask her what has happened to put you into such a cynical humour."

"Don't try to vex me by leaving me the moment you return, Stella. Have I not told you how I have been longing to have you back with me."

She stepped down from the few stairs she had already mounted, and going to his side said soothingly — "But I thought you had a hundred things to do."

"So I had, but I could not do them. I tried to write — of no use — to read — I flung the book away. It was you I wanted and only you. Stella," and he put his arms round her, "you must not leave me alone again. Not for a whole day. Give me your word, promise me not to?"

"I don't quite see how I can," and she hesitated for a moment. "I have already promised my mother that I will go and see her again this week."

"And if you have, what can a promise to your *mother* or to anybody be in comparison to pleasing me? I am the one who by right should be paramount with you."

"And so you are," she said softly; "but that does not prevent me having love to give to others."

"It ought," he said. "I hate any one else to whom you give your love."

"Then you hate your own mother, for I love her dearly."

"I know you do, and at times you torture me by jealousy of her."

"Vivian! you spoke of not being able to frighten me; but if I did not know that what you say is in jest, you would now make me quite afraid of you."

"I am not in jest," he said, the vibration of his voice showing the excitement he was feeling. "I am in love—and it has come as all things come to me, in no stinted measure, but as a fire, a torment that nothing will satisfy but the certainty that I possess your heart, whole and undivided, with not even the shadow of any other being resting there."

"But that would be unnatural. Do I ask you to give up your mother? Your friends?"

"You may," he said. "I am ready to do so."

"Oh, Vivian!" she said in reproach, and then she recalled past experiences in which imagination had invariably been the source of the feelings he portrayed. In one of these moods it would be absurd to take him seriously, he himself had protested against it; so with a different expression on her face and a little shake of her head, she said:—"I know how much to believe of what you say, and well that I do, for make up your mind that such a clean swept heart from me you'll never have. I love Marraine, I love my father and mother, my friends, down to the birds and cats and the dog, and yet I can find quite enough room for a certain Mr. Vivian Stapleton, who I suspect has been composing a poem on

unrequited love. Isn't it so?" and, with a dexterous turn, she ran quickly up the stairs to stop at the first landing and waft a kiss from the tips of her fingers to Vivian, who stood looking after her, burning with anger but deeper in love than ever.

"I won't come in, Marraine," she said tapping as she passed Mrs. Stapleton's room. "Not now, dear," she answered, just opening the door and putting in her head, then dropping her voice she whispered, "I've been having a talk with somebody down stairs, I find he's a little bit *so*," and she crossed her two forefingers, and then raised her hands over her head.

"He has been all day," was the reply. "I saw that it upset him that you were away. He has been so very sweet of late, has he not?"

Stella nodded assent. "I must not stay," she said. "I am going to curry favour by putting on his favourite frock, so until you see me beautiful for ever, *au revoir*."

Arrived at her own room she told the maid to take out the dress which Mr. Stapleton had designed for her, she would wear it that night. It was of soft white silk, trimmed with gold embroidery, and was a triumph of art and dressmaking.

Stella surveyed herself with pardonable satisfaction, and with the confidence faultless dress proverbially gives us, she went slowly down to the drawing-room to find Vivian and Mrs. Stapleton already there.

"Vivian," exclaimed Mrs. Stapleton enthusiastically, "does she not look a poem?"

Vivian's eyes told Stella that he assented, although he was not sufficiently gracious to give an answer to his mother's question. He was really to be pitied, as all who are the slaves to temper well may be. He longed to speak and talk as usual, but words and voice were no longer in his control. He was conscious that he was in the presence of the only two creatures whom on earth he cared for, and he was also conscious of an uncontrollable desire to pain and wound them both.

"I confess to feeling rather on good terms with myself," said Stella, drawing herself up and smoothing her *svelte* figure with her hands, "do you know that I'm very proud of this gown, Mr. Designer."

The smile she turned on him was irresistible.

"And when I see you in it I am very proud of the design," he answered, feeling unutterably relieved at being able to say something that did not sound sharp and cutting. She made him a sweeping curtsy. He laid down his book, went over to the fire, and leaning his arms on the mantleshef, fixed his eyes on the glass so that without seeming to look at her, he could watch her.

Not having seen the pressure of the hand he had given in passing, Mrs. Stapleton thought this sudden movement was ill-tempered and brusque; to divert the girl's attention, she said quickly —

"Oh, darling, here is something which will very much interest you," and she began turning over the leaves of a magazine she had in her lap. "It is quite short, only two verses, but very touching and sweet — by Mr. Rodney. I didn't know, Vivian, that he was a poet."

"Neither did I, and certainly after reading that very weak attempt I should still give him the benefit of the doubt."

"Oh, I don't suppose it aims at being very lofty, but it is very pathetic. I am sure most persons will like it."

"I have no doubt but they will. One has only to be sufficiently commonplace, and popularity with the multitude is secured. It is the same with his stories. He said what would hit the banal taste of the British public, and having once caught on to that, everything signed with his name is looked on by mediocre minds as 'pathetic, and touching, and sweet.'" He was watching Stella, whose eyes were fixed on the book, reading and re-reading the title, "In Farewell."

She knew that she would be wise in holding her tongue and not uttering a sound, but that unruly member would not be curbed, and she heard herself saying:—

"I have never in my life read any stories which gave me half as much pleasure as Mr. Rodney's do."

The words, distinct, clear, sharp, seemed to drop out one by one, each searing as it came Vivian's

heart — for he was jealous of all men — and his vanity ; for had not he, too, written poems and stories, many of them still in manuscript and lying in his study drawer ?

“Then I am sorry for your judgment,” he said, a smile of scorn curling his lip. “His clever manipulation of plots I admit to be admirable, and his style — with no hesitation of calling a spade a spade — although brutal, original. But there, I have come to an end. Of the dissection of emotions, the idiosyncracies of higher natures, and those minute touches which give delicacy and tone, he knows nothing ; as how should he, a man born of parents in a very obscure position, educated by charity, and through chance and a few clever sketches suddenly pitchforked into fame. What can he be expected to know of refinement in thought or nature ?” He made a pause, but as neither spoke — “Nothing,” he answered. And after another pause he continued, “He very wisely keeps to what he knows, and makes a very good thing by titillating the taste of the class from which he sprang.”

“Which possibly accounts for my admiration,” said Stella, “as *I* sprang from the same class.”

Hitherto Vivian had been talking to her reflection in the glass. He now wheeled round and fixing on her eyes verily ablaze with passion he said : —

“Is this accursed subject of your family never to come to an end ? is it to be the *bête noir* of our lives in

private as well as in public, so that I dare not give an opinion on the writings of a man whose name is common talk, without drawing on me such a sneer from you? You have brought me to the end of my tether, Stella, you have gone a little too far. It is quite time that you and I should come to an understanding with each other."

"That is exactly my opinion," she said, and as she spoke her voice trembled, not altogether at the words her ears listened to, but because of the words her eyes were raised from, every syllable of which she felt was written for her. Her resolution was taken. She had thought that that flame had burnt itself out so that only dead ashes remained. Suddenly it had leaped up into life, and her mutinous heart had again played the traitor.

"Then by some strange accident we think alike," Vivian was saying. The flood-gates of his pent up temper had burst open, his anger was surging forth beyond all control.

"For some time past," Stella was speaking calmly now, "I believe we have both felt that our position one to the other was not as satisfactory as it ought to be. It would have been wiser, — and it is what I ought to have done, — I should have spoken to you some time since; but feeling very fully the honour you had done me, the hope that we should be happy together, and gratitude to your mother whose love and goodness I can never repay, kept me silent. *You yourself* remarked that I was changed."

"I did," he said, trying to steady his voice which, like his lips and his whole body, was trembling; "for from the moment I betrayed that you were more to me than at first I had thought it probable you ever would be, your whole manner altered. You now neither regard my feelings nor my wishes."

"No," she said, "that is not true."

"It is true. Have you not been absent from me all day, and when I entreat you that this shall not occur again, I am told you have already made a promise to your mother."

"Yes, and so I have."

"*So you have,*" he repeated sneeringly. "Pish! I am sick of this farce of pretended love for those you cannot have one idea in common with. Of your mother I know nothing; but if you wish me to believe that you have one spark of affection for that loutish young cub, and those two women who accosted you at the theatre, I declare before Heaven that no one who bears my name shall ever be degraded by exchanging a single word in intercourse with them, or any such."

"Vivian, Vivian," cried Mrs. Stapleton, "try and control yourself, pray."

He turned on her furiously. "Mother," he said, "it will be better that you do not interfere. I have no wish to repeat what I said to you this morning, that the whole of this is the result of your folly. But for you, Stella and these persons with whom she

is linked by the mere accident of birth, would be strangers to one another. If you will only tell me what you want," he continued, turning to Stella, "all I ask is to let me know. You have pensioned off your parents. If that does not satisfy them double their income, double the sums you have given to the others. Let them, if you will, have every farthing of your fortune; I do not want your money, I want *you*, and the assurance that your so-called *family* are swept out of our existence for ever."

"And from me that assurance you will never have," said Stella, with a proud ring in her voice. "Every word you say but draws me closer to my 'so-called *family*,' and makes me love and honour more the one who, when it was in her power, placed no barrier between me and them. Vivian, I know now that I looked at you through your mother's eyes, that because of my love for her it was my desire to love you. We have both proved that our engagement was a failure. There is the ring you gave me, I return it to you—and I thank God, with all my heart, that we have discovered our mistake before you put a wedding ring upon my finger."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IT took many weeks, after this rupture, before the ordinary conditions of life went on, even externally the same, for Vivian Stapleton and Stella.

The unoffending engagement ring — a circlet of plain gold with a posy round it — lay a little molten lump raked out from the fire into which Vivian in his passion had thrown it. At the time he did so, although mastered by rage, he was very far from taking his dismissal as serious or final, and when he had sufficiently recovered to reflect, his whole energy was centred on what step he could take so as to insure Stella's penitence, and entreaties to be forgiven.

The warning given by the black servant to his master against the bride taking her best bonnet-box inside the travelling carriage frequently occurred to him, and he repeated again and again, "Bandbox now, bandbox always."

Just so! — women were all alike — tyrants or slaves, nothing less contented them — and this manœuvre of Stella's was as easy for him to see through as a pane of glass. She had never believed it possible that he would become so devoted to her — at this particular moment he believed that the folly

of infatuation was over—and no sooner did she catch a glimpse of her power than she had determined to push it to its uttermost limit. A nice life he should have if he did not set down his foot on this at once. Her example had actually stirred up his mother—as with fools so with rebels—one made many. The question was, How should he act. What should he do? This question—put to himself at the beginning—he went on for many weeks repeating without receiving any satisfactory reply until his blustering—even to himself—grew weaker, his confidence grew less, and a sickening fear began to gnaw at his heart.

In the first upset of the tumult he had started off for Brighton, fully expecting to be brought back by letters of entreaty. Finding that move did not win him the game, he wrote ostensibly for more clothes to be sent, but in reality to plant the thorn of jealousy by saying he intended going to Paris to see Madame Simon. And this bomb having burst without apparent injury to any one, he was actually forced into going to Paris, and remaining there in a fever of expectancy, longing to go back but feeling that if he did this without being recalled, it meant throwing up the sponge and giving in.

Stella, on her side, was not reposing on a bed of roses—the difficulties she encountered being sharpened by those pricks of conscience which constantly reminded her that much in this unpleasant situation

had been brought about by her own doing. The lightness of her heart, the sense of freedom, the hope, the anticipation, oh! it was life again, although often weighted with a sense of self-reproach in which there was much humiliation.

That little poem "In Farewell" she now knew by heart. She had dissected every line, had given a dozen meanings to each word, and had, in her own mind, arrived at the decision that it was written to enforce on her the lesson that that episode of their lives was done with, and fast locked for ever.

As our years increase we usually grow more indulgent; but youth is often very ruthless to self, refusing to entertain hope or admit consolation, and in this spirit Stella beat back her heart by repeating to it that she and Maynard Rodney would never meet again. It was the penalty she had to pay—and the sorrow for herself was swallowed up in the pity she felt that through her *he*, too, had to suffer.

Outside the trouble of these retrospections there was much to worry and perplex her. For no one, interested in the matter of the marriage, would give credit to this separation being final.

Messrs. Champion and Grant—the Stapleton family lawyers, who had the management of the settlements connected with the marriage—learnt the alteration in their clients' proposed relations "with deep regret, the letter received from Miss Clarkson"—for distracted by the dilatoriness of Mr. Trevor,

her guardian, Stella had been driven to write herself, — “should receive their immediate attention.” After writing which they did not move one step. Matrimonial hitches were of daily occurrence. They had known them occur at the very church door; but they were almost invariably smoothed over, and usually all the blame was set down to the stupidity, or mismanagement, of the lawyers. They did not mean to stir a peg — not they.

Mr. Trevor's usually hasty hand was stayed because it was Vivian's affair, and Vivian never knew what he termed his mind for two days together. Besides, his sister (Mrs. Stapleton) had written to say that she had little doubt but matters would eventually all come straight again; so he wasn't going to throw away good money, and in the end be laughed at for a fool in the bargain. “Settlements aren't horses,” he said by way of reassuring his daughter; “they can be left standing without eating their heads off.”

“Yes; but Stella's eating her heart out. She wants it all settled.”

“Tell her to find another young man then, and I'll be up in London like a lamplighter.”

“She's not likely to find another young man,” pouted Delia, “unless they know she's broken off with this one.”

“Then,” said her father, seizing his opportunity, “let this be a warning to you.”

"How a warning?"

"Why, not to get engaged in such a deuce of a hurry. There's Stella not yet nineteen."

"Well, I'm past twenty," said Delia, with a desponding air, "and I never get the chance of seeing an unmarried man. I do believe I shall end by setting my own cap at Vivian. I think I could make him tolerably miserable, so that I might feel I hadn't lived in vain."

"Hush, you madcap," said her mother, coming in behind her; "if you went away what should we do without you? Why, even the sun never seems to shine so bright when you are not here. Poor aunty! it's that that makes me pity her, thinking what will she do if she has to part with Stella."

"And father won't go or write to the lawyers because he says he's certain they'll make it up again — but they never will. Stella told me in her letter that she was only unhappy because she saw now what a great mistake she made — and that every day convinces her more and more how very unfitted she was to make Vivian happy. Of course, that's her manner of putting it; we all know it's the other way on, but it's rather hard to feel like that and yet get nobody to believe you."

"I should have fancied that Vivian would have taken some step himself," said Mrs. Trevor.

"Not he. I believe he's at the bottom of it all. He knows that he's not at all likely to find such another

girl as Stella, besides the best of it is that there's no doubt now but that he's awfully in love with her."

"In that case, dear, I think we ought to hope."

"No — now I know what you're going to say, mother, we oughtn't to hope anything of the kind. You know as we all do that the reason of her accepting him was simply because aunty brought her up to look at him through her eyes. She doesn't know how selfishly he behaved when we were away at school. Leaving his mother ill and making her worse by anxiety for him. Oh! and a hundred other things you've told me. And he'd be the same to a wife when the novelty had worn off. Why, you and father have said so yourselves, and were thankful it was not your daughter."

Not being able to deny this fact, Mrs. Trevor diverted her daughter's indignation by saying, "I fancied there might be some little mention of it in *The World* or in *Truth*, but there is not, and I've looked in the *Morning Post* every day. Generally, after a marriage has been announced as that one was, there is some little paragraph to say it's postponed; or to contradict it in some way."

"But how do they get to know?" asked Delia.

"What, the newspapers, do you mean? Oh, I fancy some friend or member of the family must write to tell them."

"And are they to give the exact words that they are to put in?"

"I should think not, but I really don't know; I fancy that 'please contradict this statement' and your card is all that would be required."

"And just address it to the editor? Well, that would not be much for any one to do." And wily Miss Delia made up her mind that there could be no reason why she should not thus far serve her friend; and during the afternoon she might have been observed strolling towards the village with an envelope in her pocket addressed to the editor of the *Morning Post*—in which was a request that he would contradict the paragraph which announced the approaching marriage of Miss Stella Clarkson to Vivian Trevor Stapleton, Esq.—and accompanying it was her father's card as a voucher that the information was correct. "I mean to tell father what I've done," she said to herself by way of a salve to her conscience, "that is if they put it in. He won't be angry, or if he is, not for more than five minutes, he never is with me."

Stella, in the meantime very much worried by her affairs, and with an intuitive feeling that from Vivian's lawyers she would get neither help nor sympathy, had carried out a determination she had made to go and consult Mr. Lovegrove. There was a small property which the old lawyer had retained the management of—the rest of the business having been gradually taken from him. In connection with

this trust, he had been summoned to Messrs. Champion and Grant's offices and there, for the first time since she was a little girl, he had seen Stella. Her kindly greeting, the pleasure his interest in her parents evidently gave her, won the somewhat eccentric old gentleman's good opinion, and when they parted they felt they were friends.

To him therefore — he being acquainted with the details of her history, her parents, and her circumstances — she could speak openly and freely about the anxieties which were now more paramount with her than her own position. The will, as she understood it, directed that she was not to come into full possession of her property until she married or was of age — which was to be when she was nineteen; but between now and that nineteenth birthday there was a space of many months, and her father had left his situation, one sister had given notice to quit the office, the other was business hunting with the man she was shortly to marry. What was to be done?

"Do you know, Mr. Lovegrove," she said, after putting the facts of the case before him, "I feel I shall be driven to what the young men do — I shall have to go to the Jews."

"No, no, my dear young lady. I should prefer matrimony for you to that."

"But about matrimony I have just found out my mistake."

"Very fortunate, very fortunate."

"Then you approve of old maids, do you?"

"When they are about your age, I think I do," said the old lawyer, slily.

"Ah, now you are laughing at me; but I don't care if you'll only set my mind at rest about my poor dear parents. I dare not tell them what has happened, because I fear it might worry them so dreadfully; and I want my mother to be prepared to go to Dawlish or Sidmouth with me, for, of course, it is only while Mr. Stapleton is away from home that I can continue to live with Marraine."

Mr. Lovegrove assured her that he would do all in his power to set matters straight, and that as regarded forestalling by a few months the income she intended settling on her parents she need be under no concern, he would arrange all satisfactorily. And when she bade the old man good-bye and went away, he said to himself, "I don't often find fault with Arthur, but about the Stapletons and that girl he lets his pride get the better of him. Of course he has never seen her, but if he lives to set foot in England again, it shall not be my fault if he does not do so. Dear, dear, to think of that pompous Briggs stumbling upon two such nice young people, ah!" and he sighed as if he had the weight of the money he had made on his heart, "I should like to think I was as fortunate in the few thousands I have to leave;" and still standing midway between the

door, which he had closed after Stella, and the seat, in front of his office table, which he had vacated, he nodded his head, and with a very good apology for a smile at what had struck him, he added, "that would make a very excellent finale, and be what he calls in his book, 'the unerring finger of destiny.'"

CHAPTER XXIX.

WHILE these events were agitating the lives of Stella Clarkson and Vivian Stapleton, and long after, when their friends and acquaintances had ceased to talk of the broken-off marriage, and relegated it to the shades of stale news, Maynard Rodney continued his search for novelty and distraction. He had given out, as a reason for leaving London, that he wanted to go to some place where he could get on with his work without being fettered by the trammels of civilization, and the idea being shared by his artist friend, Clement Barton, the two men had started for Spain together, to be later joined by a club acquaintance they met at Gibraltar, Gratten Stewart, one of those happy, irrepressible idlers, who love to tack themselves on to busy, earnest men, in whose work they take as great pride as if it had been done by themselves.

The three had "knapsacked" through Spain, lingering at different places of interest, until, fired by the enthusiastic description given by some fellow-workers with a desire to see the desert, they had set off early in April for Biskra, that wonderful oasis of the great Sahara. Surrounded by an atmosphere in which scenes from the Arabian Nights seemed mixed with

pictures out of the Bible, it was evidently a place to make some stay at, and a few days saw Barton settled at his work, and Gratten at his ease with only Rodney dejected and dissatisfied.

"It isn't the place," he said, dolefully; "it's the same wherever we go, I can't get any grip on what I'm doing."

"But you don't want to go away?" asked Gratten Stewart, anxiously. He had fallen head over heels in love with the novelty of everything he saw, and, as was his wont, voted that they should stay on here, vaguely hinting that he didn't see any distinct necessity for their going any further. As he had displayed a similar amount of enthusiasm at every other stopping-place, his ardour did not greatly impress his companions, except that Maynard Rodney began to envy the power of enjoyment which seemed to be going entirely from him, added to which, but far beyond it, was the anxiety he felt about his work which had never progressed so slowly, nor, in his opinion, had he ever written so badly. The disappointing part was, that each morning when he sat down to his desk he was full of vigour — his ideas were clear, his imagination vivid. He dipped his pen in the ink confident that it would run on rapidly, and so, at times, for the space of half an hour it did, and then as if some spring was touched, some chord awakened, he would lose himself, and wake to find his inspiration gone, and its place filled by a contempt for what he

was writing, a distaste for his occupation, a lack of interest in his surroundings, and a sickness of heart and despondency about life in general and his own life in particular.

Even Gratten had often to give him up, and before Gratten Stewart could lose hope with one for whom he felt such homage as for Maynard Rodney, the case must be bad indeed; but as the lad justly said, "When a fellow doesn't know whether anybody or nobody is staying in the same hotel, and if you run in to tell him two girls have arrived, doesn't care a hang whether they are young or pretty or ugly, how are you to get at him? He used to talk 'til you were fit to die with laughter, now he hardly says a word. If you offer him a newspaper he won't look at it, and if you begin to tell him the news he shuts you up by saying that what people are doing is nothing to him, he has no interest in anybody."

And indeed that was just Rodney's condition. Whatever gall there was in his nature seemed to have been stirred up and brought to the surface, and he was viewing all the conditions of life with a jaundiced eye. This last arrow aimed by outrageous fortune seemed to still rankle in the wound. He could not forget the occasion of it; and that the two great reverses of his life had been brought about by one and the same person appeared to him a crowning instance of the irony of fate. He had talked himself into the belief that he had mastered his love for

Stella. The last indulgence he had permitted himself was writing—in the hope that she might read between the lines—that little poem “In Farewell.” Since then he had been schooling himself to what he termed submission, but which was, in reality, despondency. And it was this absence of hope which destroyed all his imagination and stultified his conceptions, so that, added to the misery of that crushing despair, was the bitterness that each effort he made to get absorbed in his work ended in literary failure.

One afternoon Rodney was stretched out on the stone bench which runs along under the portico, in front of the hotel. Grant had just strolled off to finish some sketches in the negro village. Gratten was escorting some new feminine arrivals to explore the beauties of M. Landon’s garden. It was nearly four o’clock, and the cool breeze which always springs up about that hour to temper the mid-day heat came to Rodney with more than usual freshness.

He was watching between the puffs of his cigar the pranks of some young Arab ragamuffins, who in their long white shirts and red fezzes were provoking with bare feet an attack from some three or four small scorpions, which one of them had brought in a bottle, and had let loose among the stones in the road.

As Rodney had foreseen, these tricks were being performed in the hope that “M’sieu” would repay

them by the distribution of a few sous, in the search for which his cigar had to be laid down. In a moment the fingers of one monkey had seized it, and though, seeing an observant eye had detected him, he immediately advanced it towards the lips of the owner, joy was his when a sign repulsed him and another cigar was produced. Before any matches could be found the youthful smoker in his gratitude bolted in at the hotel door to reappear with the half of a newspaper in a blaze. This, seeing that his companions were now clustered round Rodney gazing on the wonders of a patent cigar-lighter, was flung down on the stone bench, and there, the small troop having departed, it was left to smoulder and die out.

Those who know Biskra will recall what long intervals of perfect silence occur, when no living being passes and not a sound comes through the air.

In front of Rodney, screening the so-called gardens from his view, the yellow mimosa made a hedge, its tasselled blossoms scenting the air with fragrant perfumes. Far beyond, in that dim distance where mountain and cloud seemed merged in one, there spread along the haze that streak of purple hue akin in colour to the lining of the mussel shell. Something in the solitude, combined with these surroundings, seemed to stir Rodney to his very depths, but not with the bitterness which had hitherto so poisoned all his dreaming. It was as if his old self had

suddenly been roused to life, and rejoicing in the resurrection he raised himself up, drawing in the crushed-up piece of newspaper so that he had to pull it from under him, and as he held it in his hand his eyes fell on the words, —

“We are requested to contradict the announcement which appeared in this journal some weeks since of a marriage about to take place between Miss Stella Clarkson and Mr. Vivian Trevor Stapleton.”

In as many seconds Rodney seemed to have read that paragraph a hundred times—was he awake—was he sane—was he alive? and if so—a tremor ran through him, his heart beat wildly, his pulses throbbed, even his teeth chattered in that resuscitation from death to life.

He could breathe, he could laugh, the scales had fallen from his eyes so that he looked around and saw the world was fair. He drew from the depths of his pocket-case the little ring which up to now he had kept hidden out of sight, and pressing it to his lips a dozen times, he laid it in his palm, and, fixing his eyes on it, he seemed to be taking counsel from what he saw.

Suddenly he started off, post-haste, to the bureau to find that the diligence would start for Batna the following morning at 3 A.M. He secured a seat in it, and then, while returning to the hotel, it struck him that he had not looked for the date of the paper, which, all black and charred as it was, he still carried

in his hand: a vain search, — that portion had been destroyed. Perhaps in the house he might find the other half: a fruitless hunt; no one had seen the boy, who had evidently pilched the paper from some one's apartment, an easy task where all the bedrooms — like anchoret's cells — open into the garden.

"Hullo!" cried Barton, coming some two hours later to find Rodney in all the agony of trying to fasten the lock of his over-full portmanteau. "What's up with you?"

"I'm off."

"Off! where?"

"To my own, my native land — yes," giving his friend a hearty slap on his shoulder, "Old England's shores for me."

"But has anything happened?"

Rodney gave a diplomatic shake of the head, and Barton taking it as a denial continued — "Well, upon my life, you're a nice sort of chap for a small travelling party."

"Then it's more than I've been of late, old boy. You and Gratten have been awfully good to me. I know what a wet blanket you've had in me."

"But that's no reason why you should leave us, if you don't care for the place we —"

"It isn't the place. Since four o'clock this afternoon I can see the place is lovely, and so are the people, by the way. Give that five-franc piece to Mournie's boy. Lord! how I love that young rascal."

Then seeing that Grant was looking at him anxiously, he added, "It's like this, old chap, I've got an idea, and to carry it out I must get back to London as fast as rail and steam will carry me. If I fail — I shall come back and you'll have me on your hands again; if I succeed — well — you'll probably see an announcement of it in the papers."

"All right," said his friend cheerily, feeling, no doubt, but that it was the sudden inspiration of a new plot. "I've seen all along you'd got something on your mind, and I know how a thing of that sort bothers one; still it doesn't do to take even work too seriously. I wouldn't be in such a hurry, if I were you, old chap; it isn't like anything another fellow could snap up."

"That's just the very thing it is," and Rodney, seeing Grant's mistake, laughed like a school-boy; "but I don't mean, if I can help it, to give them the chance."

"Well, there I'm with you. All the same I'm sorry you've got to go."

"I'm afraid you think it awfully shabby of me," said Rodney, apologetically.

"Not a bit of it, I don't. Art before everything, that's my motto."

"And mine — even if it's spelt with an 'h,'" but this was quite beyond Barton's matter-of-fact philosophy, and he parried it by wondering what Gratten would say.

"He'll be wanting to go with you."

"But I sha'n't let him."

"Well, then we'd best tell him that you're safe to come back again."

Rodney gave a shiver, which Barton, quick to perceive, answered by adding, "Of course you won't, I know, but that's just to let him down softly."

And in his good-nature he contrived to intercept Gratten, and impress on that ardent friend that the business which was taking Rodney to London was something upon which he did not wish to be questioned; "but we'll have a jolly evening together, and we'll sit up and see him off."

And this being put into execution, in the small hours of the morning there was a hearty leave-taking; and the diligence having rolled out of sight, the two left behind turned their backs on the tall cypresses that, under the pale light of the moon, were casting their weird shadows on the ground, and began to pick their way amid the white bundles of sleeping Arabs rolled up along the road.

"You don't think there's anything strange the matter with Rodney, do you?"

Barton looked with inquiry.

"Well, what I mean is, it isn't likely he's off his head in any way?" said Gratten, anxiously.

"What on earth should make you ask that now? I never saw him in better form than this evening."

"Just so; that's where it is. He's hardly said a

word all the time we've been away, and suddenly you find him in tearing spirits, and bolting off from a place without wanting to tell any one why. Well, if he was a fellow of my sort I should know what to think."

"Well, what do you think?"

"Why, that he's in love."

"Love!" growled out Barton, "not he — love indeed."

"Oh, yes, I know," — Gratten felt this contemptuous tone personally. He had that afternoon, for the thirteenth time since they left Gibraltar, lost his heart to the very sweetest girl in the world, — "you artist and author chaps don't suffer much from that complaint, or if you do you work it off in oils or ink. I don't believe there's an ounce of real feeling among you. Why, look at that 'In Farewell' of Rodney's; wouldn't you say he left England with a broken heart? I hinted as much to him one day. Lord, I thought he'd have snapped my nose off. He called me a brainless fool, and said if I hadn't been, I should have seen it was his liver. You clever fellows are all very pleasant in your way, but you're not the ones to come to for sympathy, that is in love you know, I mean."

CHAPTER XXX.

UNACCUSTOMED to the frowns of Fortune, Vivian Stapleton had taken his first serious reverse with a very bad grace.

This hitherto spoilt child of the fickle goddess began by assuming the position of a man whose deepest feelings had been outraged and trifled with, and, refusing to believe that Stella's dismissal meant anything but a snare to make him agree to conditions to which he would never give consent, he exhausted himself in demanding explanations, withdrawals, and apologies. For a time, Stella had answered his letters, but finding that nothing she said made on him the slightest impression, she refused any further correspondence, which, after this, was filtered through Mrs. Stapleton, who often allowed her wishes rather than her truthfulness to colour the messages she delivered and the statements she made.

Although more open-eyed than she had ever been to the faults of her son, it needed greater strength than she possessed to assist in overthrowing all her hopes. More than ever, since this unhappy misunderstanding, had she felt alive to the fact that marriage with Stella would be Vivian's salvation, for,

knowing the wound she was dealing, the young girl had redoubled her affection and consideration towards her all but mother, and Mrs. Stapleton had gained a closer insight into a nature which she saw was as generous as it was sweet. An interview with Mrs. Clarkson, too, had left its mark upon her, and although she could not quite act up to her convictions, she saw that a certain duty to Stella must forbid her pushing her point too far.

One fact which Vivian took as favouring his belief that Stella was only acting like himself was, that nothing had been done by the lawyers, an abeyance which was due to Mr. Trevor's desire that matters should be allowed to stand until May, when Stella would be nineteen — of age — and entitled to act for herself. She had expressed to him her wish to place her affairs in the hands of Mr. Lovegrove, and after a few interviews with the old lawyer, Mr. Trevor approved of the plan. He had always thought it hard that the business should have been taken from him, but at the time of Mr. Briggs' death the elder Trevor was alive, and the son had had no voice in the matter. Since Vivian's absence, Mrs. Stapleton and Stella had spent much of their time at Stillmere. They were both glad to escape from London, and the Trevors were always delighted to have them, added to which, in the secret mischief of their hearts, they saw in this visit an excellent opportunity for a most eligible neighbour to push his suit.

Sir Wilfred Mostyn, who had lately succeeded his grandfather, and whom Mr. and Mrs. Trevor would gladly have welcomed for Delia, was known to have tumbled head over heels in love with Stella. If they could not have him for a son-in-law, nothing could be more acceptable than that Stella should live close by; so invitations were sent, and parties made up, the object of which the two girls were not long in discovering.

"Stella, he really is not half bad, though," said Delia, who, so long as she fancied her parents desired Sir Wilfred for herself, had systematically set about to snub him. "I never heard him talk so sensibly before."

"Perhaps you never before gave him the opportunity."

"Oh, yes, I have; but I know the cause. He is naturally rather shy, and when he tried to make himself agreeable to me, I couldn't bear him. Now that he has only eyes for one person, he doesn't care a snap for anybody else, so he's quite natural and himself, and really I like him."

"Hm! hm!"

"Oh, don't say 'hm! hm!' in that way. You know how much chance I or anybody has when you are near. I might give him the two eyes from out of my head, and he wouldn't look round to see where they came from."

Stella shook her head.

"Does that tragic movement mean that it intends remaining an old maid for ever?"

"I am not sure that that is what I intend, but I think it highly probable that that is what I shall do. You know I have felt a very sharp pinch of experience, Delia."

"Well, but as you and he and his dear mother have often told me, there are not two Vivians, — happily."

As was her wont, Stella took up the cudgels in Vivian's defence. "Come now," she said, "you must not speak against him. He was often very good and kind to me."

"Exhausted the supply apparently, for he can't be accused of having shown you much kindness of late."

"Because he is out of humour, and then his pen always runs away with him."

"If it wasn't for aunty I wish some one else would run away with him. A woman like that Madame Simon, — she would be the one. Hasn't she a temper? hasn't she a tongue? wouldn't it be snakes for our dear cousin?"

"Delia!"

"Yes, I know, my dear; but I never can control the vulgar tongue when I'm fairly on the subject of Vivian. No doubt he would explain it as the influence of culture and æstheticism, its reflex action on a commonplace nature. You needn't open your eyes, that sounds every bit as sensible as the things

he says. Oh! it was a treat to see him and 'his intellectual affinity' — that's what she called herself to him — drawing each other out at that dinner; you didn't notice them, you were so swallowed up by that Mr. Rodney. By the way, what has become of that young man? one never hears of him now."

Stella made a supreme effort to answer indifferently that she did not know, but her mantling colour was beyond her control.

"Ah, I don't wonder at your blushing," said Delia, pointing a finger at her, "I never saw such bare-faced flirtation in my whole life. When aunty began pulling a long face about Vivian being so put out at your jealousy of Madame Simon, I told her I thought he could very well turn the tables on you there."

"I jealous of Madame Simon!" said Stella, "but when?"

"Why, the night of that dinner, when you went off without saying good-night to anybody. Vivian and aunty had a grand tussle about you, and the next day — I was told — you went to his study and asked to be forgiven, and it was then you wished him to make the engagement known."

"And did he think that was on Madame Simon's account?"

"Certainly. As it was told to me I don't see how he could find any other explanation. If it was not that, what was the reason? because, according to his

version, you said you had gone to him to be scolded ; and then you proposed that you and he should love each other so much that there would be no room left for any other person, and you finished up by desiring that your engagement might be made known, and so prevent any other misunderstanding." A strange expression came into Stella's face. "Don't you remember it ?" asked Delia.

"Yes, perfectly. I can recall the very words I said, and how Vivian sneered at them — not knowing what was in my heart one bit."

She rested her elbows on the table and, leaning her face against her clasped hands, went over in memory that scene on which a fresh light had just been thrown. Delia bent down and put her arm round Stella's neck.

"What was in your heart, dear?" she said softly.

"Oh, something not worth recalling. A shadow which at a word of sympathy from Vivian would, I believe, have then vanished, but I see now that we were at opposite ends of the pole with nothing in common between us. Oh, Delia ! let it be a warning to you, never to enter on an engagement without feeling quite sure that beyond all doubt you have made choice of the right one."

"Well, dear, I hadn't any doubt but that you had not made that choice. When I stopped with you in London I never saw you so miserable in all my life.

I said when I came home, Vivian's ruined Stella, she is not one bit the same."

"And that was just how I felt. I was drifting away from everything that was good in me. Adopting Vivian's opinions, echoing his sentiments, becoming a bad imitation of him, and yet, all the while in my heart of hearts, longing for something to snap the chain which bound us, and not having the courage to say so."

"No matter, you plucked up courage enough at last, and 'at the right moment,' too."

"And I often wonder now what made me do it, for I had allowed a hundred things to pass far more galling to me."

"That is what makes poor, dear aunty feel so hopeful that it will all come right again. She says it was about such a trivial matter, because you could not agree about some poem. Was that so?"

"Well, in a way, but not quite."

"What poem? Whose was it?"

"A little poem by Mr. Rodney."

Stella congratulated herself on not colouring, but the words had come out a trifle too precisely.

"By Mr. Rodney! — Oh! that young man again! Do you know, Stella, that I wonder if —" but at the expression which on looking up Stella caught in Delia's face she hastily interrupted the sentence by saying —

"No, dear, don't wonder at anything, because

there is no reason for it. I can tell you quite frankly that I admire Mr. Rodney's writings exceedingly, and that I like him very much indeed, but I don't want to be laughed at or teased about any one. I have a great deal of serious business to occupy me, you know," and as she put her arm round her she smiled reassuringly in Delia's face. "There is a father and mother to settle down comfortably, and two sisters to marry—for the elder one is engaged now—and a whole heap of things to decide upon and look after when I come into possession of my property."

"It seems to me if you give away such a lot you won't have much of 'property' left."

"Oh, yes, I shall. It is such a heap of money for one girl to possess. I am often troubled by the doubt whether I ought not at least to share it with that poor young man who was originally intended for the heir."

"He can't be a very young man now," said Delia, judging from her standpoint of twenty; "he was grown up when we were children. Do you know where he is and what he is doing?"

"No, but Mr. Lovegrove says he will try and find him out for me. He was making a fair living when he last heard of him, but he fancies that before that he had had a very hard struggle, so that I hope it will come as a pleasant surprise when he finds that I do not ignore the claim I consider he has on me."

Delia drew closer to her friend. "It's quite true what Sir Wilfred says of you," she said admiringly, "you're a real good sort, Stella."

"Very complimentary of him."

"Oh, that is but a drop in the ocean of praise that he bestows on you. He talks of nothing else when he is with me."

"He doesn't talk at all when he is with me."

"I know I used to think him like that ; but don't run away with the idea that he is stupid, because he is really nothing of the kind. He knows a great deal about horses and dogs and sport of all kinds, things I know that you think nothing of, but they mean a great deal to me. No, now, Stella, I won't stand it. If you are not to be teased by me, I won't be looked at like that by you. Remember, it's a bargain."

"Very well, I agree." Stella said this quite gravely, but inwardly she was smiling, for could these two but be brought together it would make more than themselves happy.

CHAPTER XXXI.

By the time Maynard Rodney left Biskra, Vivian Stapleton was already half way on his voyage to Japan, leaving — with the exception of his mother — very few to send after him a single sigh of regret.

To add to Mrs. Stapleton's sorrow Madame Simon was included in the travelling party which Vivian had joined, but had he permitted them to read him truly, he carried a wound in his heart which secured it against feminine hopes, and made groundless maternal fears.

A character such as his, made up of extremes, is certain to be full of surprises, and in situations of emergency and difficulty it becomes all but impossible to count on its actions.

Thus Vivian, after remaining in Paris for weeks which slowly passed into months, suddenly, in a day, resolved to stay away no longer, and as fast as the express could take him he arrived in London, and, without a word of announcement, presented himself at his home in Kensington, to find Delia with his mother and that Stella was staying at Stillmere.

Ill luck just now was certainly Vivian's portion, for he had beguiled the discomforts of a terribly cold

journey, and a very rough crossing, by rehearsing the scene in which he meant, by his scathing eloquence, to literally crush Stella, and thus reduce her to tears and reason. Most of us know how forcible are "the words that breathe and thoughts that burn" in those one-sided arguments where we ourselves say all the good things, and our opponent is left without a leg to stand on or a syllable to utter. When an interview of this kind has been mentally arranged nothing more tries the temper than to find no outlet for oratory which must be bottled up again. It needed all those instincts which Vivian so prided himself on naturally possessing to seem cordial to Delia and to give even a show of affection to his mother.

"What has become of Stella?" he asked sharply, as soon as Delia had gone out of the room.

"She is at Stillmere. It was necessary that she should consult with your uncle about some business, and she thought if she went down there it would save him trouble."

"Wonderfully considerate I am sure," he said, trying to keep down his ruffled temper; "at the same time I think it would be equally praiseworthy, if she reserved some small amount of this same consideration for others who have an equal, if not a greater, claim on her."

"You have forgotten, or perhaps you do not know, that your uncle is only just recovering from a sharp attack of gout."

"Certainly I don't know. How should I know, when no one thinks it worth their while to inform me of anything. Time was when I was regarded as one of the heads of the family; now, it seems to me, I am looked on as a mere cipher."

"Oh, Vivian, dear, that is a very exaggerated way of talking. I know that this sad misunderstanding must be a cause of trouble to you. No one can possibly feel it more bitterly than I do. It is the threatened wreck of all my fondest hopes."

"Then, indeed, mother, you must excuse me for saying that I think you might have acted differently. The very great want of sympathy shown by you towards me has been a source of intense astonishment to me."

"Want of sympathy!" repeated Mrs. Stapleton; "in what way?"

"In every way; and considering that you were solely instrumental in bringing us together, to say nothing of my being your own son, there is no one thing that I might not most reasonably have expected of you."

"I am certainly at a loss, Vivian, to comprehend your meaning," and Mrs. Stapleton looked at her son in amazement. "As to bringing you together, yes—I freely acknowledge that, loving Stella as I do, it was my greatest wish that I might see her the wife of the one who is dearest to me upon earth—but when have I ever known you to be influenced by

any desire that I might have formed?" She shook her head. "No — of your own free will you made your choice; that a word of mine would have had the smallest effect on your decision would have seemed as impossible to me then, as it does now."

He gave a shrug of his shoulders.

"My dear mother," he said impatiently, "it is very far from my wish to enter into any discussion of this kind which reminds me of an acknowledged fact, that in matters of feeling the majority of women entirely lose the very limited powers of reasoning with which they are originally endowed; but, to return to the question at issue, if, as you say, you were so prodigal of your sympathy, I am certainly somewhat curious to hear you explain how you consider that has been shown."

Mrs. Stapleton's heart swelled with emotion as she recalled the tender commiseration she had poured out on her son, the excuses she had made for his domineering attitude, the gloss she had tried to spread over those blustering letters, her arguments, her explanations, her entreaties. In her efforts to screen him from the just judgment of tongues around, she felt now that she had come near to endangering her own self-respect.

"The sympathy a mother gives to her child to my mind requires no explanation."

"Just so," he said, with a little "tsh" of derision which, though it stung her, she would not notice.

“It was enough for me to feel sure that you must be suffering, and that too, in spite of your letters, which I must own were anything but calculated to give the idea of a disconsolate lover.”

“Oh, that was the *rôle* it was presumed that I would play.” It needed a strong effort now to keep any check on his temper. “How vastly interesting! And I disappointed you all, did I? Ha, ha, ha! This is most entertaining.” His voice and manner, even more than his words, struck anguish in his mother; something in them seemed suddenly to reveal to her the smallness of his nature, the puerile vanity of his mind. She had gone through a severe ordeal of suffering while he had been absent. Events had brought her face to face with the crowning mistake of her life.

In the faults of her son she recognized the imperfections of his training. He was selfish, because she had never taught him self-denial; arrogant, because every one was made to give way to him; vain, for she had fostered the belief that he had no equal. Her whole life, since the day of his birth, had been spent in picking the rough stones from out his path; and her reward was, that if one of the rose-leaves she left in its place was ever so slightly crumpled, he reproached her for it.

During the all but imperceptible pause, this, and much more than this, flashed through her mind to sink heavy in her heart, so that she heaved a long-

drawn sigh before saying: "I don't know that any one was disappointed, for the reason, perhaps, that they gave more credit to what you said than I did. Speaking frankly as mother to son, Vivian, I may admit to you that nothing ever more surprised me than the affection I had of late seen you display towards Stella. I had confidently counted on her devotion to you, I have had a long experience of her warm heart and loving nature, and I thought I foresaw how you would accept it; but to see you giving her the tender consideration of an adoring lover was a charm in your disposition hitherto unknown to me."

"And had I been as wise then as I am now it would be unknown to you still. It was one of the greatest mistakes I ever made. From the first moment that Stella thought she held me in her power she conceived the fatuous notion of making me her slave, — was possessed by the wild idea that I — I, Vivian Stapleton, was going to become a mere puppet in the hands of a school girl."

"There I entirely disagree with you, and I am convinced that you judge Stella most unjustly. No, Vivian, the mistake you made was, in forcing back with your sneers and ridicule Stella's fresh, girlish romance, — in nipping with your *fin de siècle* aphorisms her warm, impulsive affections. I warned you at the time. I foresaw that such constant repression might end in a very fatal coldness."

The arrow hit too truly for Vivian to enter on any defence of this accusation; to turn it aside, he said:—

“My regret is that some prevision of this sort did not earlier warn you to avoid—*yourself*—the real cause of separation which has come between us.”

“You allude to her family?”

“I do.”

“Then I may tell you that that obstacle is entirely of your own making. Just before the New Year when that her engagement to you was broken off could no longer be withheld from her parents, Mrs. Clarkson unknown to Stella asked for an interview with me, and with a delicacy and self-sacrifice which I regret to think my son would find it difficult to appreciate, she offered, if this marriage was for her child’s happiness, to renounce every claim upon Stella, and to give a promise in the name of herself and her family never to seek to see her, and to pass her if they met without notice.”

“But what in Heaven’s name do I want more? It is the one thing I asked for—and you tell me they are willing to give this promise, and you keep it to yourself, and never so much as send me a word. Oh, mother, mother, what has come to you? Have you cast all care for my happiness away?”

His heart was beating tumultuously—he began walking up and down the room. The floodgates of fear and distrust were burst open, and the torrent

that poured forth seemed to sweep away every difficulty.

"Remember that Stella knows nothing of this interview," Mrs. Stapleton was saying.

"Nor shall she ever know from me. If it pleases her she shall think that her obduracy has brought me on my knees before her. What matter!" and he laughed triumphantly. "If it is the very smallest satisfaction to her she shall so see me."

"It seems to have escaped your notice that the promise was given on one condition." Mrs. Stapleton winced at the, to her, unseemly exultation of her son. "The condition that Stella's happiness would be secured by marrying you."

"Well!" he said, stopping before her.

"Well, it is evident that Stella does not consider that to marry you would be happiness for her."

He did not speak, but his face showed his surprise, and his mother continued in the same dry voice: "Since you have come back, it is necessary to repeat to you that, to which while away you gave neither heed nor belief."

"What?" he said, his lips forming the word to which his voice gave little sound.

"That it is no longer a question of Stella's family, it is she herself who refuses consent."

"What makes you say so?" he asked, hurriedly. "It is not that there is any one else? speak, mother, — tell me?" and he turned and took two or three

steps away, and then, overcome by the sudden revulsion, he dropped into a chair and, resting his elbows on a table, he bent his head on his hands.

The mere sight of that gesture of despondency made all the mother love in Mrs. Stapleton burst forth. She went quickly to his side and putting her arm round him : "No, no one," she said. "It is but a few weeks since, that, in all but so many words, she refused Sir Wilfred Mostyn. She did not wish him to propose to her, and she made him understand by her manner what her answer would be."

"But surely that means hope for me?" He was looking at her, his eyes strained to catch some gleam of comfort, but she had none to give him. Tears of that tender pity which is born of great love rolled down her cheeks. "It is worse than useless to deceive you," she said. "I fear that as regards becoming your wife Stella is lost to you." For a moment he continued to look at her as if he had not grasped her meaning, then he let his head slowly droop until his face was hidden from her view. "Oh, Vivian!" she cried, "my idolized, worshipped boy, never think that your mother — who, if she admits to herself that you have a failing, knows but too well that you owe it to her imperfect training — has not strained every nerve to urge your suit. I have questioned Stella. I have appealed to her. I have implored her to tell me the reason why she should so suddenly feel it impossible ever to become your wife." He did not

raise his head but he made a little movement of it to show he was waiting for her answer. "It is always the same reply — That the engagement was a mistake. That you neither of you pretended to feel much love for each other. That then that satisfied her, but not now. Now if she ever marries it will be some one to whom she can give her whole heart."

"And that some one cannot be me," he said, bitterly.

Mrs. Stapleton stretched out her arms to enfold him in her embrace, but he gently put her aside: "Some other time, mother," he said. "Just now I feel I want to be alone."

CHAPTER XXXII.

Is it to verify the old adage "pity is akin to love" that hearts, between which something has crept in to divide them, are so frequently at the moment of final separation brought into closer touch again? Certain it is that in these early days of his misery, when Vivian was his more natural self and poured out his whole soul in entreaties to Stella, he had never before been so near to gaining her affection.

True to his temperament, his remorse and regret, like his anger and his indignation, were pushed to the utmost extreme. There was nothing he would not promise, nothing he would not consent to. If Stella would but give her word to marry him, her wish would be henceforth his law. As to her parents, they might live with them, her sisters and brother should have welcome from him. She had but to say what it was she required of him, and, no matter how great the sacrifice, she could consider his consent as given. And it was by this terrible straining to gain his desires that at length he most effectually defeated his end. Stella, at first touched, softened by his pleading, set herself the task of putting before him the very grave reasons which had actuated her

decision. She tried to show him that it would be a solace to think that the friends they had once been, they still might be. She repeated to him his own arguments and theories, and reminded him of the supreme contempt he had expressed for those unions which depended for happiness on the mere commonplace bond of love; but like most other sophists Vivian had little relish for instruction conveyed through the medium of his own teachings. His one aim and object was to win Stella, and it began gradually to discover itself to her, that the desire to regain her love was becoming mastered by the overwhelming passion to obtain his own will.

Her eyes once open to this, she could see nothing but servility in his professions, a feeling which even his mother began to share with her. As for the others who watched him, they simply looked with contempt on the tricks they regarded as the stock in trade of a *poseur*. It is hard for a man who all through his life has acted, to expect that any one should take him seriously, and Vivian began to feel that, end as it might, the game was nearly over. He would put his fate to the test by a final interview with Stella, and if that failed, he would bid her farewell, and go he cared not where, so long as it was sufficiently far off for her not to have the satisfaction of triumphing over him. Although she held his heart with a power which no one would ever wrest from her, it was utterly beyond his vain nature, with his inflated opinion

of self, to understand, or appreciate, her generous, unselfish character.

"All that is best in me," Stella would say, "I owe to your giving, mother, and to Marraine's training. There are very few girls that have two such teachers."

And Mrs. Clarkson would fix on her daughter a look of mingled pride and love. In her mother's eyes she was the very embodiment of perfection. The two were spending a very happy holiday together. During the time of this conflict with Vivian Stella had no wish to be near the neighbourhood of London, and her visit to Stillmere ended, she had asked her mother to join her and accompany her to Cromer, that place being fixed on, because at Sherringham, near by, "Father had seen a cottage which had taken his fancy," and if Stella liked the situation they rather thought they should decide to settle there.

How wonderful is the refinement bestowed on some persons by ease and content! Under their new conditions of life Mr. and Mrs. Clarkson seemed transformed into different beings. The man who had opportunity and leisure to enjoy all those surroundings of country life, in which his early instincts delighted, bore no resemblance to that poor city clerk chained all day long to a desk and drudgery. And the wife, whose nature had always been keenly alive to refinement and delicacy, now that sordid cares no longer oppressed her, could give free scope to the

tastes which for years she had been forced to keep under.

Sensible enough to neither suppose nor desire that her parents should be mistaken for persons of rank or position, it gratified Stella to see that there was no trace of that vulgarity in speech or manner which calls up a blush even on the cheeks of love.

Her sisters she felt were irrepressible, and most probably would always continue so, but what of it? She could afford now to smile at their noisy fun and somewhat obtrusive pleasantry, for to balance this, neither the one nor the other seemed to comprehend the meaning of the word *self*; and in all their dealings, and in their actions, personal abnegation was natural to them. That which grated on you was on the surface, but beneath that surface the metal was the purest gold; and Stella felt that, though she might be annoyed and disconcerted by her sisters, before, at heart, she could be ashamed of them, she must become ashamed of herself.

One morning, when the winds which had blustered through March had fallen to a rest so profound that not a leaf was stirring, Stella proposed that she and her mother should walk along the shore, sheltered by the cliff, towards Runton. The idea was delightful to Mrs. Clarkson, and off the two started, Stella's spirits in harmony with the fresh, bright, sunny day. The tide being out, she beguiled her mother over the green slippery rocks to the stretches of fine sand

washed smooth by the sea along which she ran tempting the waves with her pretty feet, and laughing with the glee of a merry child when they all but caught her.

Mrs. Clarkson was watching one of these narrow escapes as she rested against the false keel of a battered-in-boat jammed in the sea-weed between two pinnacled rocks. Suddenly she was aware that some one was approaching from behind her. A man, who, drawing nearer, raised his hat, and then stood hesitating while he looked from her to Stella and back again. She thought he was going to speak to her, but, before he could do so, Stella, having caught sight of him, was at her side.

"You!" she exclaimed, "is it possible?" then turning she added, "Mother this is Marraine's son, Mr. Vivian Stapleton."

"If only for your mother's sake I am very pleased to see you, sir," said Mrs. Clarkson, with old-fashioned courtesy, and she held out her hand which Vivian took with the tips of his fingers, and, in place of shaking, respectfully bent his head over. Of the three he was the one who visibly lacked the largest amount of self-composure.

"And what has brought you here?" Stella asked pleasantly.

"I came to see you," he answered significantly. "I thought it not impossible that you would understand that probably I should do so."

"Yes."

"Does that mean that you did expect me?"

"No — it means that I am listening to what you tell me."

A quick contraction came over Vivian's face which he twisted into a smile as he said to Mrs. Clarkson, "Your daughter is as cool as the morning."

"Well, now I dare say you do feel it fresh coming straight down from London. Perhaps Mr. Stapleton would prefer returning to the house, Stella?"

"I will give him the very clearest directions if he does, mother, but I cannot offer to lose this beautiful day. It is putting new life into me."

"You hardly need me to say that I must have an interview with you alone."

Vivian was chafing under Stella's manner which he looked on as simulating independence and indifference. His mood was an agitated one. His nerves were highly strung and over-strained, giving a sharpness to his tone and manner, which had led his valet to announce that "his mightiness had got a fit of the jumps on him again."

"Alone!" Stella repeated, as if considering the possibility of granting that demand.

"My dear, I was just about to say," said Mrs. Clarkson, "that I don't feel equal to much walking this morning, so that if you and Mr. Stapleton cared about going on, I would prefer to stroll slowly home again."

Stella laughed outright at this transparent subterfuge. "What an excellent diplomatist this mother of mine would have made," she said to Vivian. "You sweet old dear," turning to her, "wanting to give up your walk on this delicious morning, but there really is no occasion to do so. What Mr. Stapleton has to say can be very well said before you."

"No, there I can't agree with you, I am quite one with Mr. Stapleton. If two people have anything serious to say, it is best said to one another, a third person, though she may be your mother, is in the way."

"I wish you would allow that mantle of consideration to fall on your daughter's shoulders," said Vivian, giving a profound bow to show his thanks to her.

"Oh! she has got plenty of the stuff in her, though it may be fashioned another way," replied the proud mother. "I don't know that it's well for children to be the ditto of their parents in everything, and speaking of that, how little you take after Mrs. Stapleton. I thought to find you the image of her."

Mrs. Clarkson, without being actually disappointed in Vivian's appearance, did not find him at all like what she had expected to see. The portrait she had pictured in her mind's eye had been made up from descriptions his mother had given of him, and from what Lottie and Carry had said of the beau they had seen with Stella at the play; but in place of the delicate refinement of form and feature combined with

an impression of strength and manliness essentially his own,—which had been Mrs. Stapleton's portrayal of her son,—he stood before her a tall, well-grown man, very tolerably covered with flesh, which was rather superabundant in his face, making the jaw without being square seem heavy. He had a fine forehead and dark expressive eyes, and wore his brown hair in a fashion which suggested that some time had elapsed since he had submitted his locks to a barber.

"No," he said in answer to her remark on the absence of family likeness, "as far as I know I have the happy advantage of not resembling any one. It would inexpressibly annoy me to be constantly told that I reminded those about me of this person or that one. I place a very high value on my own distinct individuality."

Mrs. Clarkson's face showed that she did not in the least comprehend this mixture of vanity and pomposity. The bewildered look she gave made Stella come to her aid by saying, "All that high-flown reasoning does not convince us, does it, mother? We know quite well that he would give all he possesses to be as handsome as Marraine."

"Oh! good looks aren't of half the value to men that they are to women," said Mrs. Clarkson sententiously. "Besides, every eye makes its own beauty, and I dare say Mr. Stapleton could tell us of many who think he hasn't any reason to be discontented

with his looks," and having delivered herself of this left-handed compliment, she gave a nod to Stella, an old-fashioned sort of half-curtsey to Vivian, and turned towards the house which in the distance she could see.

Looking back a few minutes later, she saw that the two had walked on, and were seemingly in earnest conversation.

"I'm not afraid of you winning her back," she was mentally saying; "and since I've seen you, I'm more than ever glad it is so. I feel you'd have done your best to make her ashamed of us; and, though I don't believe that would have been possible, it's an end to all married happiness when the two that ought to be one are pulling in opposite ways."

From Stella herself Mrs. Clarkson had received a very vague and imperfect account of the actual cause which had broken off her engagement with Vivian; but the interview with Mrs. Stapleton had been a source of great enlightenment, and though at the time, the sacrifice the parents had offered was made in all good faith, Mrs. Clarkson now felt that Vivian was neither worthy of her child nor of all she had been willing to forfeit for her.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WHEN Stella came back to the house alone, saying that Mr. Stapleton preferred to return at once to London, Mrs. Clarkson felt certain that the interview had not ended to his satisfaction. Too delicate to put questions which might seem like indulging curiosity, she allowed Stella's unusual silence to pass without comment, and with the wish to spare her the effort of trying every now and again to start conversation, she occupied herself with a book she was reading.

This cloud of reserve overshadowed them until late in the afternoon, when Stella, standing at the window, gazing out on the sea, furtively wiped away some tears which dimmed her eyes.

This tell-tale of some hidden grief was more than Mrs. Clarkson's self-control could bear. She went over and put her arms round her daughter, saying —

“Won't you let mother share your sorrow?”

“Oh, it isn't quite sorrow, dear,” and the small head nestled closer to her; “not, at least, in the way you mean.”

“You're not regretting anything you've said or done?”

"No," and the face, flushed and tearful, was raised so that a sight of it might give greater force to the denial, "if it was all to come over again I should wish to do exactly the same. It isn't for that I am crying, mother, it is because of a feeling that I can hardly explain." Then after a pause she added, "I had so hoped that Vivian and I would have parted better friends than we have done."

"Well, there, darling," said the big-hearted woman, "I must put in a word for him. It's very hard to accept friendship when you are begging for love."

"And love I should have given him if, at the beginning, what he felt had been love for me."

"And you think it was not love?"

"It was not love I am sure."

"Hm!" and Mrs. Clarkson paused reflectively. "Yet you say it was not your fortune that made him choose you, and certainly it was not your family, for I know, by more than you have told me, dear, that the cause of this rupture between you was owing to something he said about your belongings."

"No, no," said Stella, hastily; "the truth was that we had both reached a state when the merest spark must cause an explosion, and the spark was given by our opposite opinions of an author, and something he had written!"

"Dear, dear, that was a trivial thing. It's a poor affair when we can't agree to differ, but you know, Stella, that that last day, when you came to see me,

and we talked about your wedding, although I tried to feel cheerful there was a weight at my heart about you. I couldn't say how, but you didn't seem to be quite my own happy, loving Stella — the dearest child mother ever owned."

"I know," was whispered tearfully.

"I thought it over to myself, and I wondered whether you could have seen some one else; — if it was that that was the matter. For love plays many tricks, and if there's a heart to hit will sometimes draw his bow at a venture and stick an arrow there."

"I don't think after this experience," said Stella, sadly, "that I shall be able to trust myself to know what love is."

"Oh! don't fear that, dear. When it comes, you won't need to ask its meaning. The old, old story is always the same story, yet each one who listens to it hears it differently, and fondly thinks she finds a charm which no one ever found before."

Stella, with her head resting on her mother's neck, lay quietly folded in her arms. Mrs. Clarkson had gone back in memory to the days of long ago. Twilight was stealing around swallowing up the light, save that golden line along the distant sea behind which the sun had sunk to rest.

"Mother, tell me what you think. If some one cared a great deal for some one else, only there was an obstacle in the way so that they had to part, feel-

ing that perhaps they would never meet again, is it likely that they would soon forget, should you say?"

"What, both of them?"

"No; the one who went away, I mean."

"That would depend on how much hope he took with him."

Stella allowed her mother's hazarded *him* to pass.

"Very little," she answered; "he would not think that he was cared for more than as a friend."

"In that case, if he was sensible, he would try to think no more of her."

"Yes —"

The expression on the fair face told that that was not the answer wished for, and the mother, quick to perceive and tender to spare, added: "But hope is very strong in those who truly love, and before it gives place to despair, waits and searches to make sure that not a single chance is left."

A light shone in the eyes as if these words brought comfort to her. "Only it is so difficult to hear of things at the other end of the world," she said.

"Not in these days, it isn't. Why, Edgar in his letters often speaks of things that have happened, which is news to us who've been on the spot all the time."

The little ripple of laughter which came from Stella told Mrs. Clarkson that what she had said had pleased her daughter. She bent down, and tilting up

the round chin so that she could better see the sweet face, she began while looking at her to toy with the soft rings of hair which fringed her daughter's forehead.

"I don't ask you to give me more of your confidence, dear, perhaps you have no more to give. Only, if in your heart there is nothing to reproach you as to the way you've seen best to act towards Mr. Stapleton, never despond about what may come about. Very unforeseen things happen, more especially to some who seem marked out by Fate for good or ill luck to be always pursuing them. Now from your very birth I've looked on you as one of Fortune's favourites, and, after blessing you with the gifts of good looks, and good means, and a loving heart that will weigh down all the gold you've got, I'm not going to discredit her with frowning on your love."

Stella took her mother's hand, and rubbing it softly against her cheek, she said: "You always say something that gives comfort to me. How is it?"

"Because I'm mother and you're my child, you know."

"Ah! but all mothers and children are not the same, I wish they were. If poor Marraine tries to sympathize with Vivian he gets fretted with her; he looks on any advice she gives him as an interference, and, no matter what goes wrong, he'll in some way so twist it that he'll say she was to blame."

"I'm afraid there must have been something

wrong in his bringing up. She didn't know how to train him as well as she trained you."

"Poor Marraine! I love her very dearly. It is a grief to me to think I am causing her sorrow. Vivian hurt me dreadfully by saying that I was driving him from his mother and his native land, and making him a wanderer and an exile from everything he valued and cared for. When he does go away (and I see he means to), I shall have to go to Marraine immediately."

"It's not I, my dear, would keep you."

"I am sure you would not — because she would be left without any one: for if things end as they are almost certain to, she will not be able to have much of Delia's company."

"Now, there's a funny thing to happen; as I say, in love you never know."

Stella laughed merrily. "I quite believe that from the very first Sir Wilfred was attracted to Delia, but she would not be commonly civil to him. She snapped at him if he spoke to her, so that he felt completely snubbed, and then, I suppose his heart being awakened and all in a flutter, he flung it at me."

"Poor young fellow! it makes me feel quite sorry for him!"

"But you needn't — for if she would not accept his love, he was determined she should his confidence; so first he poured into her ear all his hopes,

and when they were over, all his disappointment, she sympathizing with him so that the two were never apart. I soon saw what was going to happen, and it was really that, more than any business, which made me go to Stillmere. I was so afraid that Aunt or Uncle Trevor would say something which would frighten them off from each other. Poor Sir Wilfred! at sight of me he felt he ought to be very broken-hearted and disconsolate, but he didn't feel so in the very least, and he ended by being as confidential with me as formerly he'd been with Delia."

"It seems to me that that must have been awkward for him."

"Just a little, perhaps, at first, but I helped him over the stile, and we parted the best of friends. I advised him to delay actually proposing as long as he could — but I see it will come soon now. And then there will be the wedding, and that will be something for Marraine, for Delia must come to London for her trousseau, and Marraine dotes on clothes and delights in shopping."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

It was the middle of May when Maynard Rodney again took up his old quarters. A May bedecked with all the flowery freshness of which the poet loves to sing. London wore her brightest aspect. The parks were spread with green, the trees leafy, the chestnuts in full bloom, and apart from the hope which sometimes burnt high and then dwindled to a flickering flame, Rodney—an Englishman to the backbone—felt glad at heart to find himself once more at home. Never, so he thought, had his rooms looked so cosy; never had Rags made the wriggle of her wiry body nor the wagging of her stumpy tail more intelligible: as plainly as words could speak they kept repeating her joy at this meeting; and even when, after numerous gyrations, she had curled herself into her usual comfortable knot, she kept one eye fixed upon her master, and at the faintest shadow of a smile, a cold nose would be poked into his hand, and the dumb show of welcome would be gone through again.

He soon found out from two or three men he met at his club that Vivian Stapleton had left England, and screwing up his courage to overcome a horrible

self-consciousness, he managed to ask why it was that Stapleton was not married?

"Well, I'm not sure that I ever heard the exact reason given," was the answer; "my own idea is, from something that casually dropped from him, that he changed his mind;—a special interposition of Providence in favour of the young lady I should say, for he was I, I, I,ing it on his own trumpet louder than ever."

"Where has he gone?"

"On a regular globe-trotting expedition with a party of cosmopolitans, whose trunks are always to be found blocking up the vestibule of some hotel. They've got a certain Madame Simon among them," and the speaker screwed up his face to convey that his opinion of the lady was not flattering. "Happen to know her?"

"I have met her."

"Ah! then, if you think as I do, you're not wanting to meet her again. However, that is the party that our friend is among; and, if my wishes have any weight, long may he remain with them."

"He'll not be recalled at my desire," said Maynard; Rodney, and the two nodded good-bye to each other, Rodney pondering over the news given to him.

It was not exhilarating to think that the engagement had been broken off through the fickleness of Vivian's fancy. Rodney knew now that he had been flattering himself that it was Stella who had dissolved the

tie, and that the words he had spoken to her had been the reason.

He returned to his rooms, he went carefully over the scene of his parting with Stella, and in all the many times he had reacted it, never before had it seemed so tame, and to bear such little promise. Calmly reviewing the whole circumstances under this new light of Vivian's desertion, oh, how he longed to have the fellow within hitting distance of him. He could not catch sight of one ray of hope. His idea on the journey had been to rush to the house, to seek an interview, to ask for a meeting. It would be looked upon as gross impertinence was the view he took now. And close on the heels of this conviction, was that tangible dread of the barest suspicion that he was influenced by the desire for her money, — the anticipation of again handling the fortune which had been originally meant for him.

Poor Rodney ! unconsciously he was paying a penalty of love. At the first turn of Fortune's wheel in his favour all his hopes took a rosy hue, and before the flush had faded from them, he was on his way home. Now, that mischievous imp, who had so suddenly stirred up the glowing flame, had as suddenly, and with less reason, dashed cold water on it.

"Blow hot, blow cold," is one of Cupid's old-time tricks, as Maynard Rodney being an author must have known ; but those who have countless means at hand to account for, and to cure, another's wounds,

can seldom find one drop of Gilead's balm with which to soothe their own.

"I'm not in the mood to go anywhere, or to see any one," he soliloquized despondingly, "only I shouldn't like old Lovegrove to hear I was back from any one but myself. Let me see," and he consulted his watch. "No, it's too late. I should only make the old boy lose his favourite train. Rags, what about you and I having a spin? You'd like it, eh? All right then, come along. There's no doubt but that it will make one of us happy."

Away went dog and master at a brisk trot — along Oxford Street to the Marble Arch, and then into the Park, with its flower beds ablaze in their spring glory.

The fresh crisp air, the bright atmosphere, began to tell on a nature keenly alive to externals, and Rodney became sensible that the burden of his difficulties was lifting, and did not weigh upon him so heavily. He was looking with admiring eyes at the hyacinths, the daffodils, — these last recalling an excursion he had made the previous May to Champéry where they were growing in luxuriant wildness. From Champéry he was quickly at Les Plans, and then with a few steps at Peuffaire, and there his memory halted, its eyes looking on a face which had become marvellously familiar and dear.

Barely a year, since that first meeting, that casual passing sight of a being of whose very existence he

was then ignorant, but who was now the pivot on which hung the happiness of his life. When he recalled the few times he had seen her, the scant intercourse there had been between them, how more than strange this all-consuming passion seemed to be. Then that sudden declaration he had made to her, would he not have called it madness in another man? Yet she had listened — listened not in amazement and surprise, but in a certain sympathy with what he told her. He would seek her at once; he would tell her what had brought him back; he would ask her to say whether he was to remain, or to go into banishment again.

Rousing himself, he found he had not moved a step, he was still standing looking at the daffodils with Rags seated by his side in an attitude of patient dejection.

“I say, what am I going to do with you?”

The answer was given by Rags careering madly on, and dashing to the opposite side in acceptance of a combative invitation from a fox terrier.

“Bother the dog! What did I bring her for?” and Rodney gave a sharp whistle to make her return. Perhaps Rags scented that prompt obedience might mean interference with the liberty of the subject, any way she first tried a little mild expostulation; pausing and turning her head she gave a loud “Bow wow wow,” which plainly said, “Come on, do,” and to which her master replied, “All right, old lady, only

at the next corner into a hansom we get, and so I tell you."

At Stanhope Gate this threat was put into execution, and it being advisable to arrange some little programme of what he would say, Rodney was still busily occupied in preparing an explanation for his return, when he was aroused by the voice of the cabman asking through the trap door overhead, "Is seventeen, sir, the right number you told me?"

"Seventeen," was answered sharply as Rodney looked out to be met by the sight of drawn blinds and newspapered window panes. "Out of town," he gasped, and then as a vent to his feelings he called to the cabman in a tone which caused that knowing worthy to snigger, "Drive on, can't you? What's the good of standing here? Don't you see the house is shut up?"

The horse got a flick, and on they rattled until having allowed his fare time to what he called "cool off," the driver ventured to ask, "Where to, sir, where do ye want to go?"

Rodney gave an answer which need not here be written down. The grin on the cabman's face widened as entering into the joke, and to keep the ball rolling, he asked insinuatingly, "Royal Academy, did you say?"

"Yes, Royal Academy," was the answer. Rodney adding to himself, "May as well go there as to any other place. Take the dog home," he said giving

the address as he got out and gave the man his fare. "Just pull open the cab doors, and she'll jump out, she knows her way up-stairs."

It was not often that Rodney was taken possession of by a thoroughly bad temper, but on this occasion it was the form in which his disappointment showed itself. He paid his shilling and went up the stairs mechanically, passed in by the turn-stile, and walked straight on through the sculpture hall to the room beyond.

"Of course I must begin at the wrong end," he said irritably. He was so perturbed in mind, that if he could not find any one else he must snap at himself. His mood was positively savage, and he glared at each picture he stood before as if he saw in it the work of a deadly enemy.

It was nearly five o'clock, and the rooms were rapidly thinning, but whether they were full or empty had no interest for Rodney. Since he had entered the building he had walked with his eyes looking straight in front of him, and now, although aware that some one was standing close to his elbow, he did not turn to notice if it was a man or a woman. The individual though—who had hovered near him since he entered the room—had made up her mind that she would not be so entirely ignored, and taking a few steps in front, and stooping so as to seemingly get a closer view of the picture they were standing before, she suddenly drew herself up,

and turned round so abruptly that they were brought face to face, the one with the other.

"I hardly think that you remember me," was said in an embarrassed manner, the quick mantling colour suffusing the cheeks of the speaker.

Rodney lifted his hat, and tried to assume a smile of intelligence and pleasure, while he rapidly searched his memory to find out where he had met the lady.

"Ah! I see you don't recollect me. I have evidently the better memory of the two. I am Delia Trevor. I met you some time ago at dinner, at my aunt's, Mrs. Stapleton. You know her son Vivian."

Before she had got as far as this, Rodney was shaking her hand with empressement, saying effusively, "But how good of you to speak to me — how kind — how very kind."

"Well, it really needed some courage, your thoughts seemed so *very* far away; but I knew if I said to Stella —"

"Are they in town, then?"

"Oh! you've been to the house, have you?"

"I — went this afternoon — to call there."

"And found the windows papered up, and the blinds down," Delia laughed gaily — "that's what we did it for. We came up to town to do shopping, and be very busy, and so we did not want any callers. Of course I don't mean you, because we none of us knew that you were here."

"I have only just returned from Algeria."

"Really! I did not know where you had gone, but only the other day, I was saying what a long time since we had heard anything of you, and Stella —"

"She is not here with you — is she?" and he looked eagerly round the room.

"No, I'm all by my little self, with Clements the maid, you know, to do propriety. I left her somewhere on a settee half asleep, and aunty was so tired she went home. Stella is buying furniture for her mother who is staying with her at a hotel. Such a lot of things have happened since we met at that dinner party."

"If it was not for the fear of keeping you standing, I should ask you to tell me some, I am positively dying of curiosity."

"Are you?" she said laughingly, "well, then, let us sit down. I thought that men, especially your awfully clever men, never admitted to feeling curious."

"I don't know what they may admit. I only know that I am insatiable. The reason I was such an idiot as not to see you was because I was in a furious temper at thinking they were all out of town, and I should not be able to hear anything about anybody."

"Anybody being —?"

"Well, *you*, for instance."

"*I!* No, no, that won't do; but I'll be good — I'll spare you, and begin at the beginning. Well, first and foremost, Stella, — Miss Clarkson is no longer engaged to be married to my cousin."

Rodney made a little inclination of his head.

"You knew that, did you?"

"Yes, I saw it in a paper when I was at Biskra."

"What paper? How was it put in? I do so want to know."

Rodney took out his pocket-book, and from it drew forth the piece of newspaper containing the contradiction. "That is it," he said.

Delia gave a quick look of astonishment; then, scanning the paragraph, she said: "Yes, it is the right one. Shall I make a confession, Mr. Rodney, and tell you something I have not told any one before? I put that into the paper."

"You!"

"Yes, I. It was in this way: no one would believe that Stella was in earnest—but I knew she was—every one said they were sure to make it up again, it was such a ridiculously small thing to quarrel over. You were the cause, you know. They fell out over some poetry you had written. Stella says it really might have been about anything, they were in such a state of friction—and so it might. It didn't need her to tell me that, for months she had been miserable through feeling that she did not care one bit for him. Any other man but Vivian would have set her free long before—Oh, but you mustn't," for Rodney had seized her hand, and was pressing it impulsively. "Suppose any one saw us! I'm going to be married next month."

"He'll be the very happiest man in the universe."

"That's just what he says to me, and it's a great wonder that we've come together. I couldn't bear him at first, and he wanted to marry Stella, only she would have nothing to say to him, and that made me quite angry with her, because she would have been our neighbour. I'm very glad, now, that she said 'No,' for since I know him better, I see that he is exactly the right sort for me; indeed, we are excellently suited to one another. But I am afraid I must go," she added, rising, "or aunty will wonder what has become of me."

"And I have found no words to tell you how great a service you have done me."

"Oh, I haven't really told you anything yet. Only I feel I ought not to stay, because I half fancy that Sir Wilfred may be waiting for me. What I was thinking was that I would give you Miss Clarkson's address—the hotel where they are staying for a few days. You might like to call on her and her mother."

"I wish I could think of something new," said Rodney gratefully; "you must be so tired of being called an angel."

"Indeed no—I don't think I was ever called one before. I suppose you know that it's like the fable of the fox who lost his tail. I'm so happy myself that I want every one else to be happy too—and I love Stella dearly."

"Would you be shocked if I said, so do I?"

"Why, of course, I know you do. I saw that at the dinner party; but Stella is most impossibly difficult. Wilfred thinks she means to be an old maid — perhaps because she refused him — but I'm not so sure."

"And the name of the hotel is?"

"Ah yes! Bartlemy's, Albemarle Street. It's close by. I think if you were to go now you would find them at home."

"Then let us look for your maid, and after I have seen you safely away, I shall take your advice, and act on your suggestion."

CHAPTER XXXV.

As Rodney took his way from Burlington House to Albemarle Street he seemed to tread on air. His heart danced with joy, his pulses seemed to sing, body and mind united in a pæan that he was going to see Stella.

No need now to arrange what he would say to her, the right words were bubbling up to his mouth, only needing that dear presence to call them forth. He neither saw the shops nor the people he was passing — a rosy cloud hid everything else from view, and he felt himself fortunate in maintaining just so much self-control as enabled him to calmly ask, when in answer to his knock the door was opened, "Is Miss Stella Clarkson within?"

The man intimated that she was, adding, "What name shall I say, sir."

"Mr. Maynard Rodney."

Good gracious! his tongue had become glued to the roof of his mouth; as he went up the stairs his knees shook under him — a sudden limpness seemed to pervade his whole frame. Every atom of self-possession was going; in courage Bob Acres was a lion to him.

Throwing open a sitting-room door Rodney heard, with ears that seemed stuffed with cotton wool, his name announced, and it was almost a relief, when, in place of Stella, a comely matron advanced and said pleasantly, —

“I dare say it is my daughter, Miss Clarkson, you have come to see. She has not returned yet, but I expect her in every minute.”

They were shaking hands by this time. Rodney was saying that though he had not had the pleasure of seeing her, Miss Clarkson had spoken of her mother to him.

Mrs. Clarkson's face showed her gratification.

“Ah!” she said, “to those who belong to her she's one in a thousand. I only wish that every parent was so blessed in their children.”

“And she is not your only blessing,” put in Rodney adroitly. “I have seen a son, a tall, handsome young sailor.”

“What, my Edgar! Oh, come, I must shake hands again with you. Why, however did you happen to know my dear boy? I can't call to mind that I've heard him or Stella mention you — Mr. Rodney was the name I think I heard him say?”

“Yes, Maynard Rodney.”

“Maynard Rodney,” she repeated. “No — and yet it seems familiar in a way. However, Stella will make that clear. She ought to be back by now. She'd only to go to Robert Street, Adelphi, to see

her lawyer, and she said she knew he wouldn't keep her long."

"Her lawyer — in Robert Street," repeated Rodney; "would his name be Lovegrove, I wonder."

"Yes, Lovegrove, do you know him?"

"Ever since I was a small boy. He is my lawyer."

"Well, now to think of that! How strange, to be sure! ah, I often say if half the things that happen were put into books nobody would believe them as true."

"Your daughter once said something of the same kind to me when she was telling me her own history, which is in some ways a romantic one."

"It is, and like most things in life, what was good luck for her was another's misfortune."

"You allude to a boy who I think she said had originally been meant to have the money."

"Ah, poor lad, it was a sore injustice to him, and so all of us have always felt. Strange to say 'tis about him that Stella has gone to-day. She is just made of age, you know — nineteen — and she wants to do something by way of compensation to him."

"For which, no doubt, he feels very grateful."

"Well, I don't know about that. According to Mr. Lovegrove he is very stiff-necked and proud as to letting her know anything about him. I dare say he counts her — as well he may, not knowing anything of her — as his enemy; but Mr. Lovegrove is determined to try and bring about a meeting between

them, and if after that he can keep up his stubbornness, well — although I am her mother — I shall have a very poor opinion of him."

Rodney was about to reply when the door was opened, and Stella came quickly in, saying, "Oh, mother dear, have I kept you waiting? I am so sorry."

"You needn't be," said Mrs. Clarkson, cheerily. "I've been very well employed talking to this gentleman, Mr. Rodney," and as she said his name she looked smilingly at him, to turn her eyes quickly to her daughter, and see that as *he* had turned ashen pale so *she* had flushed crimson to her temples, while each, agitated and trembling, spoke in a voice dropped almost to a whisper, Stella asking, "Have you come back again?" Rodney answering, "Say you are glad to see me."

"Glad," Stella stretched out both her hands, but before he could take them Mrs. Clarkson, with an intuitive assurance of the situation, slipped quietly out of the room, and the two were left alone.

And alone we will leave them; for in those supreme moments when heart speaks to heart, and disguise is thrown aside, and all concealment of love is over and done with for ever, words but vulgarize and descriptions fail. Let those who read conjure for themselves the picture of a Paradise into which none enter save those whom love calls. Ah, happy

Eden ! realm of the great magician by whose mighty spell we mortals walk as gods.

"Not six?" It was Stella looking at the clock in amazed alarm. "Oh, what can mother think? I must run and find her and bring her here."

"Do," said Rodney, going with her to the door, and there standing, following her with eyes that would scarcely let her go from out their sight.

His happiness was so newly found that he almost feared he might suddenly awake to find it all a dream.

During the delay which necessarily took place before Stella returned, he tried to bring himself down to the level of ordinary life. He bethought himself that no word had passed between them as to his income or his means, neither had he remembered to give a hint as to that secret of his personal identity by which Fate had so strangely linked them. Elated and stirred, his imagination was full of fire. With Stella to work for, he felt he could snap his fingers at money, and balance it with fame. Few inspirations are as powerful as happiness, and running through, and intertwining with thoughts of tenderness and love, were suggestions and ideas more brilliant than had ever come to him during all those weary months of absence and despair.

"And so," said Mrs. Clarkson, who had come back to the room, and was sitting with Stella by her side

and Rodney standing before her, "all the while I was talking so innocently to you, thinking what a friendly nice young man you were, you'd only come to steal her and take her away from me."

Mrs. Clarkson was trying to steady her voice, trying to smile through the tears which had gathered in her eyes.

"No, no," said Rodney, "not to steal her, not to take her away—you know her better than that—her heart is big enough to give us all a share."

"It is you, darling mother," said Stella, "who must find some love for him."

"Try and make room," said Rodney, "for another son. Since when a little lad I was sent an outcast from home, I have never known a mother's tenderness or sympathy."

Stella's hand was in his own. "I do believe," she said, "that it was talking of that which first drew us together. We began comparing notes of how we felt, and then something, I don't know what—for I had never dreamed of such a thing before—made me tell him about myself and Uncle Briggs leaving me his money."

"And we agreed to write a novel on it."

"Well, there's many a worse story," said Mrs. Clarkson.

"Yes," answered Rodney, "only she insisted that when she—the heroine—grew up she was to marry the boy who had lost the money."

"Well, so far as the romantic goes, I should agree with her as to that ending—but it's there that stories and real life don't agree. Things are mostly made to finish up happily in one case while in the other they often turn out very contrary."

"Well, then," said Rodney, drawing Stella to him, and looking with pride at the lovely face flushed and radiant with joy, "our story must prove the exception to the rule."

"That's as it should be," said Mrs. Clarkson, laying a hand on each. "'Tis the true lover's creed that none before have felt such happiness as is given to them to feel."

"It seems to me impossible," was Rodney's answer.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

It was decided that evening that when Mrs. Clarkson went back to "the Cottage" at Sheringham — where, though only partly furnished, they were already living — Maynard Rodney and Stella should accompany her. This arrangement necessarily entailed a few days' delay, during which Mr. Lovegrove would have to be seen, Mr. Trevor written to, and first and above all the engagement must be announced to Mrs. Stapleton.

"No one must be told before Marraine," Stella said, "and no one but I must tell her."

"Will it pain her?" asked Rodney.

"I fear so, but not as it once would. In many things she is very altered; she says it is because she is growing old and life looks very changed to her. For my sake you must try and love her. I owe her so much, that she will always be very, very dear to me."

"So far as I am concerned, darling, I will do my very best to make her forget that you have not married her son."

"Poor Vivian!" sighed Stella; "will he ever be different, I wonder? Ever be happier, in himself, I mean."

"Never so long as he keeps that self on the lofty

pedestal where he has placed it. There is no such barrier to happiness as an overweening estimate of our own value and importance. Association with him taught me a lesson I hope never to forget."

"Vivian teach anything to *you* !"

Rodney would have been more than mortal not to have felt touched by the sweet flattery her tone and look conveyed.

"Yes, to me," he said, drawing her to him, "and I will tell you how. We writers are very open to temptations which too often weaken and lower our characters—the praise we read may have no merit for its foundation, the flatteries we hear may be false; and yet, both may so titillate our vanity that we begin to hold ourselves as creatures above ordinary beings. It was seeing this in Stapleton that made the man so odious to me, and knowing how often we condemn in others the faults that others see in us, I resolved to take him as a warning—so whenever you see any disposition to self-glorification in me just whisper in my ear, 'Vivian Stapleton.'"

"I will," said Stella, "so;" and we will not betray the fashion of her whispering.

Early the next morning Rodney went to Albemarle Street, anxious to learn the programme arranged for the day's proceedings. He brought Rags with him, introducing her as the one friend whose good-will was necessary to assure their future happiness and harmony.

"And the parrot?" said Stella. "Oh, we must have Polly to complete the happy family. I consider she was a very important link in bringing us together."

And she related to her mother the incident of the bird and Edgar, and how Rodney had watched them, and had referred to it at dinner. This involved going back to the scene at the theatre, which being described to Mrs. Clarkson she exclaimed, —

"Why, it's all accounted for now. It's him that Carry and Lottie took for the beau. No wonder I couldn't make Mr. Stapleton's appearance fit in with their description. Did you know the mistake they'd fallen into? If so, you never came to my help in any way, Stella."

"Did I not, dear?" said her daughter rather consciously. "I think you mustn't catechize me too severely — particularly to-day when I have several unaided confessions to make. First to Marraine — then to Delia."

"Dear Delia!" put in Rodney gratefully. "Tell her she has my gratitude for ever. I am going to have that piece of newspaper framed, and, as we must go to Biskra for me to disperse those sighs I used to fill the air with, we'll hunt up Moumie's boy, and if money can tempt that young rascal, we'll bring him back with us."

"What, a little black boy! Oh, delicious!" and Stella laughed outright at Mrs. Clarkson's look of horror. "What a lot of things there will be for us to do."

"It doesn't seem to me that you're either of you in much of a hurry to make a beginning though," said her mother. "And there's Mr. Lovegrove, you know, don't forget him."

"No, and he likes me to go to him rather early."

"Did you tell her that he was your lawyer, too?" Mrs. Clarkson asked of Rodney.

"His lawyer! No — is it really so?"

"Yes, really so," said Rodney.

"Oh, but that simplifies matters exceedingly. If he knows you, of course he'll understand; besides, we can go together, it will be so much nicer to have you to help me."

And on that Rodney, who had mapped out a little scheme, arranged that he would take Stella to Mrs. Stapleton's door, leave her there, and at two o'clock he would be back at the hotel to drive, with her and Mrs. Clarkson, to Mr. Lovegrove's offices in Robert Street.

His own intention was — immediately after depositing Stella — to go and see his old friend, who he knew would heartily rejoice at the good fortune which had come to him. Circumstances had been against Maynard Rodney making any intimate friends; the only other person interested in what affected his happiness was the invalid he had visited at Les Plans, and he was trying the good effects of a year in Colorado. His father as well as his mother dead, — his sisters and brothers were widely scat-

tered, and so entirely had they been kept apart in those early days, when family affection is a natural feeling, and its roots get firmly planted, that now — except when assistance from him was needed — they did not trouble to ascertain if he was still alive. Instinctively then it was to Mr. Lovegrove he turned, remembering with gratitude that in the dark days that were now over, he had ever been stanch to him and had rendered all the service in his power.

“My dear Arthur,” said the old man, when the surprise of Rodney’s unexpected appearance was over, “I almost believe that had it been put to me what wish I desired to have granted, my answer would have been to see you to-day.”

“It does me good to have a welcome from you,” said Rodney, heartily; “but had you any particular reason for so wishing to see me?”

“Well, yes. I *had* and I *have* — and to save time and to avoid bush-beating — which has never been the mode of action between you and me — it is connected with the coming of age of a young lady who has given me a great amount of pleasure by restoring to me the management of that property and income which of right should be yours, Arthur.”

“Hm!”

“No, no, no. Now make an effort to overcome that little stubbornness of yours. I know the difficulties of your position,” and he laid a kindly hand on Rodney’s shoulder; “no one could ever give you

more sympathy than I do, because no one could so well understand the injustice you suffer from. But you must acknowledge the girl is not to blame — a most sensible young woman — one I may say quite out of the common way — full of anxiety to make all the compensation in her power.”

Rodney affected to give a little shrug of the shoulders, and Mr. Lovegrove went on quickly to say: “I am not urging you to take anything from her — that is a matter that has to do with your own feeling — but I do ask you not to seem churlish in refusing to see her. Come now, we are friends of long standing. I am an old man, you are a young one — for the sake of long ago, and all that has happened since then, let Mrs. Lovegrove send you an invitation to dine with us and to meet her.”

“I hardly see how I can do so.”

Mr. Lovegrove’s disappointment was visible. “For this reason, I came here purposely to tell you the cause of my sudden return to England.”

“Well?”

“Well, the cause is that I have proposed to a young lady, that she has accepted me, and that we are going to be married without delay.”

“Tut, tut, tut, tut!” said the old man vexedly. “I thought you were never going to marry.”

“I never was until somebody agreed to marry me. So you see if I accepted Mrs. Lovegrove’s invitation I should — ”

"Oh, let that be, it's of no consequence, I quite understand."

"Of course I could bring the young lady with me."

"No, no, better not trouble her just now."

And he turned away trying to recover from his disappointment while affecting to look through some papers for a letter.

Rodney made an effort to assume a look which should correspond with the tone in which he said, —

"I cannot help feeling very disappointed at the way in which you have received my announcement. I have been in love with this girl for months. I left England broken-hearted because I discovered she was engaged to another man. By the merest accident I learnt while at Biskra that the engagement was broken off. I rush home, I propose, she accepts me, and the first thing I do is to come to my one friend to tell him of my good fortune, and he does not wish me happiness, and is not even interested enough to ask her name."

"Arthur, no, don't say that. I — I — well to be frank with you, I had conjured up a little romance of my own, and — well, what you said put an end to it — but now that is past and gone, so, to show your forgiveness, accept my best wishes," and he warmly grasped Rodney's hand, and still holding it he added, "now tell me what is the lady's name?"

"Miss Stella Clarkson."

"No, no, let us put all joking aside, now."

"Miss Stella Clarkson."

Mr. Lovegrove pushed up his spectacles and screwing up his eyes peered anxiously into Rodney's face.

Deception could not be kept up longer; real feeling was too deep to further continue this travesty, and putting his hands on his old friend's shoulders, Rodney, not without emotion, said, "What I tell you is the truth. It is she — she herself, and she has not a suspicion that I am who I am. She only knows me as Maynard Rodney, the writer."

"Well, well! Truth, indeed, is stranger than fiction! Had I read of such a thing I should have said, 'Impossible! a mere story-writer's fancy.'"

"Ah! life is so full of such improbabilities that often we authors dare not make use of the true histories that lie at hand."

"And you have won a prize in every way," said the old lawyer, speaking out of the thoughts that crowded into his mind. "That girl has a noble nature, Arthur; she even went so far as to ask my opinion on dividing the fortune with you. Dear, dear! it makes us wonder how much those that are gone know of what is happening here below."

Rodney shook his head. "I don't think I will enter into those speculations with you. I am not so sure that this union would add much to Uncle Briggs' pleasure, wherever he may be."

"Do him the justice to believe that that money

was never intended to go wholly from you. Don't judge the old man too harshly, my boy."

"I! I bear him no ill-will now. From the bottom of my heart I am thankful that I was released from that degradation and slavery. I acknowledge that the blow which severed the chain was heavy, but with that fortune at my back, I should never have been the man I am now."

"And after all it was only being saved for you all the time. Lucky dog! It but needs me to be forty years younger, Arthur, and, knowing what that girl is, I should envy you."

"That reminds me that we have arranged to come together to see you. At two o'clock I am to call for her and her mother, and bring them here. Now to carry out the little plot I have arranged. At the door I shall invent an excuse to leave them for a few minutes, and when they have gone up to you I shall step in through William's office to the inner room. You must tell her that 'the young man has been prevailed on to see her and that he is there awaiting the interview.'"

"And am I then to lead her in?"

"Yes."

"Dear, dear, I haven't asked half the questions yet. How you saw her? Where you met? but they must wait. Be off with you now, so that I may get through my other work and have time to collect myself to play this most important *rôle*."

And the arrangements to further this conspiracy being carried out, half-past two o'clock found Mrs. Clarkson and Stella mounting the stairs to Mr. Lovegrove's office, Stella a little disconcerted at Rodney's sudden desertion. It was true that he assured her that he would rejoin them in a very short time, but he would not hear of their waiting in the carriage for him. His absence, he said, would afford her an opportunity of definitely settling something about that young man whose claims seemed to unduly weigh on her.

Stella felt that he was really always rather hard on this unfortunate individual, and when Mr. Lovegrove, under the idea that he was carrying out the strict canons of stage diplomacy, said in an excited whisper, "We've tracked him at last. He's found — I've got him — he's here," Stella, knowing at once to whom he referred, was glad that the first awkwardness of the meeting would be over before Rodney arrived.

"Does he know that he is going to see me?" she asked.

"He does."

"And he does not mind? I really believe it is I who am going to be nervous now."

"That'll pass off directly you are brought face to face with one another," said her mother, smiling reassuringly at her. "It's over twenty years since I saw him. He was a very ordinary looking boy at that time," and then, fearing she had spoken harshly, she

added to Mr. Lovegrove by way of explanation, "that constant nag-nagging gives such a hang-dog look to children."

"You hear what your mother's recollections are," said the old lawyer mischievously; "there is surely nothing to be nervous about in an ordinary looking young man, with a hang-dog expression."

And an arranged signal having caught his ear, "Come along," he added, and opening the door, he led her into the other room, Mrs. Clarkson bringing up the rear.

Rodney was standing with his back to the window. Stella gave him an instant's smile of recognition, then her eyes went rapidly round the room.

"He's gone," she said; "he's not here. You have not sent him away, have you?"

Rodney did not answer. He looked at Mr. Lovegrove who said, "No, he is here. He is standing before you."

"That is Mr. Rodney," she said, with a dazed expression.

"Mr. Rodney to you, but to me, who have known him since he was so high, he bears the name I first knew him by — Arthur Briggs — the original heir to that fortune which now belongs to you."

Stella's colour died away, she made a step forward, but staggered. "I — I —" she said, with a look at Rodney so appealing that he caught her in his arms, and holding her there, "My darling," he cried, "you

never guessed who I was. From the very first I knew you, and I so battled against my love for you, but it was too strong. Fate meant us for each other, and not Uncle Briggs, nor all his money, could keep us asunder."

"Oh, what a happy ending," murmured Mrs. Clarkson.

"Happy indeed," said Mr. Lovegrove, with a look at the two who stood oblivious of all save the presence of each other. And laying his finger on his lips, "We will go into the next room," he whispered, "and for a few minutes leave them alone together." And they stole quietly out and closed the door.

MICAH CLARKE:

His statement as made to his three Grandchildren, Joseph, Gervas, and Reuben, during the hard Winter of 1734.

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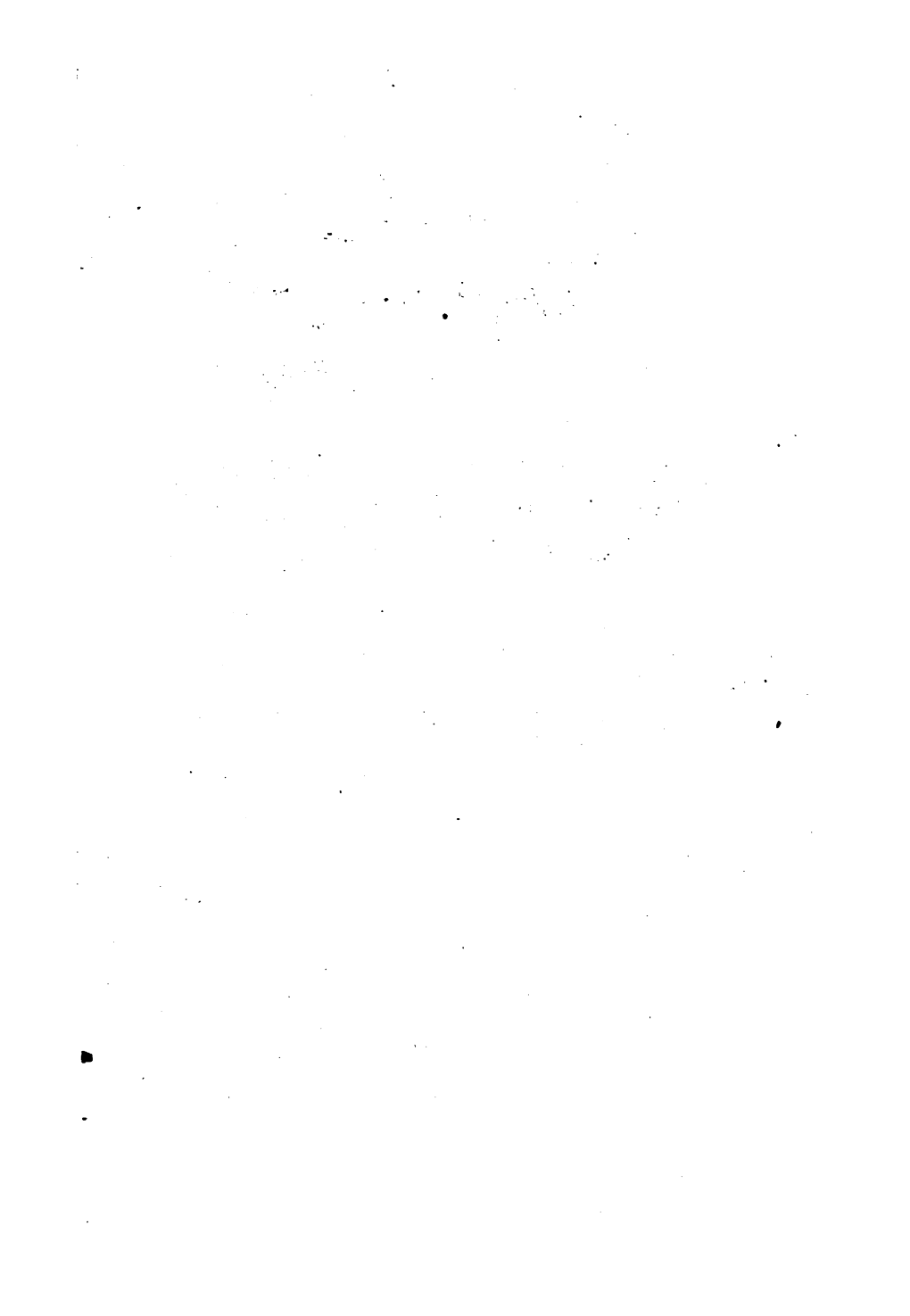
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